

#16

PURPLE &  
ORANGE?



Joan  
Hank  
Woods  
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## CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
Message from the Editor: Official Guide-Lines.....	3
"They Also Serve" by Marcia Brin.....	4
"Resident Aliens" by Linda Ruth Pfonner.....	12
"Soliloquy of a Viper Pilot" by Karen Weikert.....	23
"The Ultimate Victor" (Part III) by Mary S. Jones.....	24
MARA'S JOURNAL: Uniform of the Day?.....	40
"Lost and Found" by Cynthia Greer.....	44
"If I Have a Sneeze That Can Move Mountains" by Mary Jean Holmes...	48
"Prince for a Day" by Karen Klinck.....	62
TIY'S LOG.....	78
Letter of Comment (!).....	81
"Why Did It Have to Be...?" (Part IX) by H. Ravenwood.....	82
From Deep Space... ..	107
Acknowledgements.....	109

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# THEY ALSO SERVE

by Marcia Brin





## "They Also Serve"

(By Marcia Brin)

His glass slammed against the wall, shattering into a thousand fragments that glittered on the rug like tiny diamonds. He stared morosely at them. His act of violence hadn't made him feel any better, and now, he had to clean up the mess.

"Damn, damn, damn! Double damn! It's really starting to get to me. First in my class! Dammit, I was first in my class! So why in Hades am I still here?" Sure, it was an honour to be made a Viper Instructor right out of the Academy, the first graduate ever to be given such a position; it was a testament to his unquestioned prowess with a Viper. But... "If I'm so damned good, why aren't I on a battlestar?"

A stupid question -- he knew the answer. The GALACTICA had a full complement, and his father wasn't going to bump someone for him -- not that he wanted the Commander to, anyway; he'd never asked for special treatment, and, in fact, studiously avoided it. The only other commanding officer, battlestar or otherwise, who wasn't afraid to have Adama's son aboard was Cain, and the PEGASUS had no openings. And Cain wasn't about to make one for someone else's "pampered royal cub" (his words), no matter what rank he'd graduated with.

Damn! Did those chicken-hearted commanders think he was going to cause trouble by comparing them to his father?

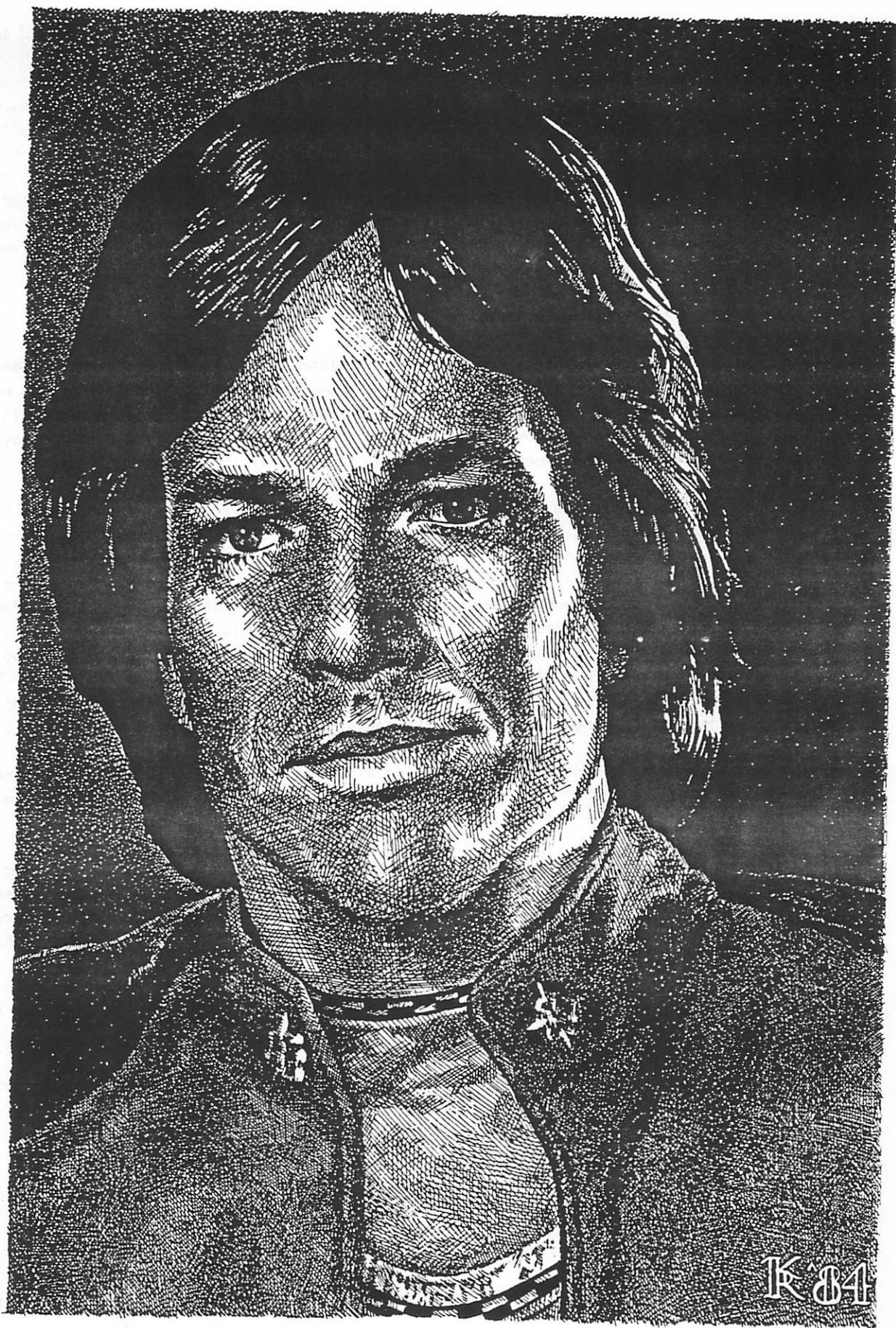
Sure, he really wanted the GALACTICA, but there was always time to transfer to her at some future date. What he most wanted now was to be assigned to a fighting position -- any fighting position. To be out there, doing what he'd been trained to do, defending his home, helping his friends, doing something.

But it's hopeless. The only way I'll leave the Colonies is with the GALACTICA, and then, only if a position opens. Which probably means someone has to die. Damn it! I feel like a ghoul!

Sighing, he grabbed a handvac and began to clean the rug. His students weren't all that happy, either. He believed a Viper pilot should be able to build one from scratch, and fly her in his or her sleep. Fancy flying tricks were fine and would even, on occasion, save your life. But ninety-nine out of a hundred times, basic flying skills were a far more valuable survival tool. To live your Viper, to feel her every mood and response, to be one with her -- that, not a lot of flashy moves, made a great pilot.

So, when the other classes moved on to the simulators, his group was learning to take their craft apart. They stayed on the simulators long after the others had hit the skies, too, and they practiced basics when the rest were trying their wings at something fancier. He kept them in the lower atmosphere for a long time; a Viper, although always a graceful bird, was less so in heavier air. If you could handle her there, while dealing with turbulence, mountain currents, and storms, you could handle her anywhere.

His students resented being "left behind," as they viewed it. But they flew better than their



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fellow students — smoother, more confidently, and they held formations better. He could see it; why couldn't they?

It didn't help matters that he was somewhat aloof. He didn't really want to be; but he was only a few sectars out of the Academy himself, and he knew his students would have a hard enough time thinking of him as they did the other instructors, all of whom were considerably older, and most of whom were ex-fighter pilots. The students tested him in ways they wouldn't test the others, and possibly expected a "buddy-buddy" relationship that could also demand special favours and leniency. So he'd been forced to establish his authority from the start, keeping a deliberately created gap between them and himself, a gap that age and experience automatically put between the other instructors and their students.

Result: one very unhappy Second Lieutenant — and one very lonely ex-Cadet.

It hadn't been like that during his student yahrens. Without boasting, he knew he'd been both popular and respected. And on his own, too; he'd requested that his father's identity be kept quiet as long as possible. By the time his fellow Cadets found out about his parentage, his first yahren had almost ended; and they knew him well enough so that it didn't matter. Apollo had never needed many friends, but he liked people, and hated to feel cut off from everyone.

Well, almost everyone. The young instructor seemed to have been...adopted. The division between first and second yahren students on the one hand, and advanced students on the other, was rigidly maintained, so it was rare to have friendships — or even acquaintances — across the gap. As a result, he hadn't met his two self-appointed guardian angels — now third-yahren students — until a few sectars ago. Instructors weren't supposed to fraternize, but one night, about a sectar into the yahren, frustrated and depressed, he'd dropped in on one of his old haunts from his student days and had promptly gotten roaring drunk — an unusual occurrence for him, as he never believed in doing anything to excess or in losing control. He also didn't believe in self-pity, but he vaguely remembered telling two blurry faces about his desperate longing to do what he'd been trained to do; later, he remembered those same two faces gently putting him to bed.

From that time on, they'd decided he needed looking after, and more than an occasional cheering-up. It wasn't that he didn't like them — Boomer was quiet strength and intelligence, and Starbuck was, well, Starbuck — but he knew the Academy would frown on the fraternization.

A slight smile touched his lips. It was also true that, on occasion, they drove him crazy. Or rather, Starbuck drove him crazy. He couldn't quite figure out why Boomer's good sense and caution didn't rub off on Starbuck; instead, Starbuck was always dragging Boomer into the craziest exploits — some of which also, unfortunately, ended up involving him. Of course, he had to admit, they did succeed in cheering him up...

He sighed. I could use some of their high spirits right now... Distracted, he reached for a piece of glass, only to jerk his hand back suddenly.

"Frak!" he swore, shaking his hand, then putting the injured finger to his mouth. He sat back against the wall, trying to soothe his throbbing finger, and stared gloomily at the carpet.

Yes, indeed, this is turning out to be quite a yahren...

\* \* \* \* \*

"All right, everyone, hold together. We don't want any stragglers when we jump."

Apollo glanced out of his cockpit; his students seemed to be in perfect formation. Hyperspatial



Jumps were child's play these days, but accidents had been known to happen. This was, after all, their first long-distance flight. He knew they were ready -- more than ready, in fact. With a surge of pride, he watched them; they flew better than any other Cadets with the same amount of flight training, and better than most with considerably more experience. But they were eager, and he wanted to make sure their enthusiasm didn't lead to any mistakes.

"Ready?" He waited for the chorus of excited assents. "Good. Let's go."

He ran the Jump coordinates through his computer. A steady whine began, increasing in intensity as he braced himself. Then, with a burst of power, they were gone.

\* \* \* \* \*

Everything had gone well; the manoeuvres were perfect. The students had flown superbly, and even they had seemed pleased. Perhaps they were finally aware that they could outfly their fellow Cadets blindfolded. For the first time in a long while, Apollo felt pretty high himself.

"Foolish pride leads to destruction" -- or so said the Book of the Word. He'd been ready to order preparations for the Jump back to the Academy when a sudden cry rang out over his communicator. Checking his instruments, he quickly located its source -- Anifa, a young Taurean.

"Cadet Anifa, I assume there was some reason for that rather unmilitary outburst?" he asked coolly. There'd been more than a hint of panic in the sound, and he hoped to nip it before it got any worse.

His ploy seemed to work. There was a moment's silence, then Anifa's voice, sounding much more composed, though still tense, reached him. "Sir, I think you'd better check your scanner. I hit mine, and..."

He felt a chill down his spine as her voice trailed off, and he reached for the scanner controls. For a moment, his mind refused to accept what he saw, and when it did, he felt a surge of panic of his own, which he clamped down on immediately. His eyes remained glued to the scanner.

### Cylons!

There were at least forty-five of them, over twice his small group's number. Here he was, a damned good -- but totally untried and inexperienced -- combat pilot, about to be forced to engage a Cylon strike wing with twenty-one Cadets, none of whom had even touched a Viper a yahren ago. Part of his mind wondered at the audacity of the invaders, to approach the Colonies so closely, while the rest worked furiously to develop some plan -- any plan.

There was no chance to jump into hyperspace; the Cylons were almost upon them, and it took too long to set a Jump's coordinates and build up the necessary momentum. Escape was also out; the Vipers might be able to outrun the enemy, but the Cylons would have a field-day shooting at their exposed, unarmed backsides.

There was no choice, really. They had to fight -- and pray...

"Tighten up the formation -- you're about to get some on-the-job training." He deliberately kept his voice calm and matter-of-fact; he didn't want any panic -- but he didn't want anyone to take the situation too lightly, either. "Remember, the flying skills you have will be more than enough, if you use them! Stay with your wingmates -- no one goes off alone. Guard one another's backs. And if any one of you tries grandstanding and survives, you'll damn sure wish the Cylons had gotten you!"

He heard a chorus of acknowledgements over his communicator. He knew they were in trouble; he could see it -- feel it -- as he watched his students quickly tighten their formation. There was panic in them, barely held in check. They moved too slowly, too hesitantly... He had the feeling their fear would choke them, that they would freeze...

He had to do something to calm them, to convince them that they were capable. The Cylons were visible now, two of their delta-shaped craft in the lead. Grimly, he aimed his Viper for them.

"Heads up, and watch!" he snapped into his communicator. Experienced combat pilots swore the Cylons couldn't outfight the Colonials; he hoped they were right. For one long moment, he held a straight flight line, then he slammed the nose of his Viper down, cutting an angle below the Cylons, and almost immediately snapped his ship sharply upward. The exposed belly of one of the invaders was directly above him, and he fired a laser blast, flipping his own craft into a barrel roll less than a heartbeat after firing.

The Cylon ship blew into a thousand pieces. Apollo ignored the debris and raced after the second one. Its crew attempted evasive manoeuvres, but Apollo couldn't be shaken off, and within microns, the second invader suffered the same fate as the first.

He raced back to rejoin his students. "Does that tell you something? You can outfly them, outfight and outthink them. But not if you don't try. You're Warriors -- act like it!"

His gamble appeared to have paid off; he could feel the difference as they tightened their formation. And not a moment too soon -- a split micron later, the main Cylon attack force slammed into their line.

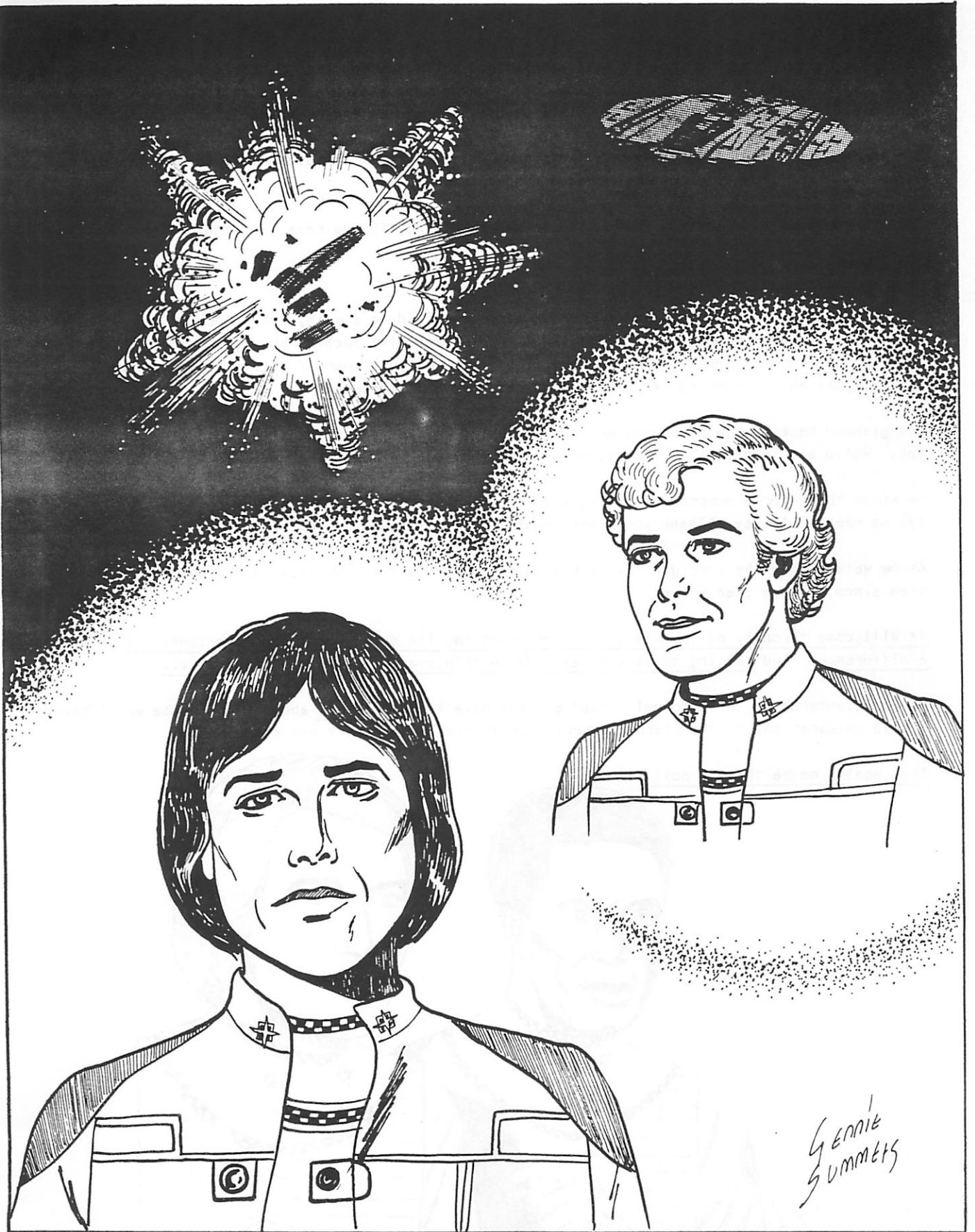
Apollo could never remember exactly what happened in the battle that followed. It always remained a jumble of movement and ferocity, a confusion of flashing silver and flaming lasers. His students fought like demons, and he always remembered the feeling of pride as they held to, and used, every skill he'd ever taught them. He himself "free-lanced" -- employing his greater skill and experience to plug any gap or cover any unguarded back, racing like a whirlwind in an effort to be everywhere at once.

Only one event stood out in his memory. Although he would lose other members of his commands throughout the yahrens, few ever affected him as this one did, the first of "his people" lost in an enemy attack. A nice kid, a good student, with a Hades of a lot of potential -- but he let himself be pulled out of formation in the heat of battle, and his Viper was already a fire-ball before Apollo could reach him.

He'd been avenged almost at once, but vengeance wasn't any comfort to his instructor. Nor were the words from his superiors, who later told Apollo that to take on a squadron of Cylons with a group of Cadets only half their number, and to lose only one, was nothing short of miraculous, a tribute to his talents both as a commander and as an instructor. No, vengeance and words were no comfort; they didn't matter. He could never think back on that incident without feeling a special sadness.

The battle ended as abruptly as it had begun. The thirteen remaining Cylon fighters broke off and raced into the void. There was a moment of silence, then an explosion of laughter and cheers blared from Apollo's communicator. His students' relief was an almost tangible presence.

He understood the need to release their tensions, but they weren't out of danger yet. Where there was one Cylon strike force, there could be more. This wasn't the time to get careless; they could celebrate to their hearts' content when they were safely back at the Academy.



Gennie  
Summets



"Heads up, Cadets; they may come back. Set your coordinates, and let's get out of here!"

\* \* \* \* \*

They were waiting for him when he left debriefing. The session itself hadn't been long, and had ended with Commander Treybor requesting that High Command assign a battleship to patrol the area. Apollo had recommended citations for his students, a request the Commander took under advisement.

His students were gathered in the hallway, and waylaid him as he headed for his quarters. Cadet Anifa led them; they all looked subdued and sheepish.

"Sir," she began diffidently, "we'd like to say something, if you have a centon."

Nodding, he stopped before her.

"Well, we...we wanted to say we're sorry, sir," she said in a rush, then hurried on. "You were right, and we were wrong, and out of line. And we're alive because you knew better. I mean, we really knew those Vipers! When we were fighting, well, I found I didn't have to worry about flying, just about fighting, and, boy, did that make a difference!"

She glanced back at the other students. "So, sir, we, well, just want to apologize, and to thank you. We've all learned a lot today, especially that we'd already learned a lot -- from you."

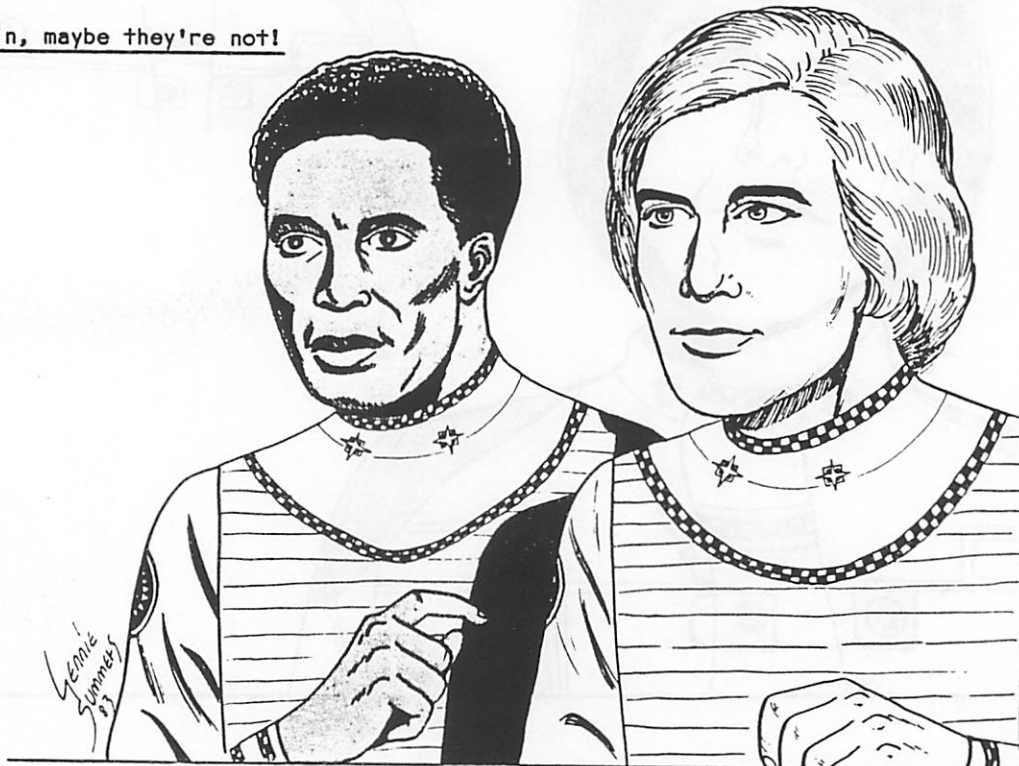
He stood there for a moment, fighting down the horrible feeling that he was going to cry. Finally, he managed to say, "Thank you," not trusting himself to say more.

As he walked down the corridor toward his quarters, he felt a lightness in his heart for the first time since his own graduation.

It will come through, my transfer. In the meantime, I'm doing something important. I am making a difference. And helping to save lives. Maybe things are looking up, after all...

"Hey, Lieutenant! Nice going! You're gonna have to tell us all about it. Maybe we'll have a little celebration, huh?" Starbuck hurried up to him, Boomer only one step behind.

Then again, maybe they're not!





# *Resident Aliens*

## "Resident Aliens"

(By Linda Ruth Pfonner)

When she had finished her log entry and managed to hit the BREAK key, Allahara was exhausted. It seemed to require an extraordinary amount of effort for her to lift her eyes to meet Commander Christopher's compassionate gaze.

"Thank you, Allahara," he said softly. "We're grateful to you. As irritating as he can be at times, Tanis is our best sentiologist. We value him highly."

"Some of your crew might disagree with that," she commented. "But I know of none who truly wish him ill."

"I've wished him laryngitis, on occasion," the Commander of the OSIRIS admitted with a chuckle. "You look tired. Why don't you go and get some rest?"

"Thank you, Commander. I believe I will."

\* \* \* \* \*

Since she didn't truly fit into any crew category, Colonel Arsenaux had finally, in exasperation, given her a temporary billet in the Life Station, with a recommendation that she find herself a bolt hole somewhere in the vast reaches of the OSIRIS, a place she could customize to her own unique needs.

She had gravely thanked the Colonel, and had immediately sought out the Piper, asking for aid. He had considered it something of a challenge.

Within three days, he led her to a luxuriously appointed little cage not really far from his own, but with complete privacy and almost perfect sound-proofing. It had a sleeping mat large enough for her to roll around on, and even a tiny refrigerator. There was no turbowash, but she didn't water-bathe, anyway. All her sanitary needs were provided for, and with the cooling device, she could keep small amounts — considering her needs — of food on hand, in case she felt too anti-social to go out for meals.

"This increases my debt to you immeasurably, Piper," she told him, her mental tone quite awed. "I have not seen such luxury since I left Uylenden!"

"Don't worry about it, Watcher," he smiled. "I'll collect eventually."

By those words — and by the overtones of what he did not say — she knew he took his reward in her delight, and would consider any further payment to be extraneous. That crystallized her determination to find something with which to gift him.

But now, exhausted by the over-use of a long-unpracticed Skill, she padded silently to her quarters and sprawled on her mat. She was asleep in moments.



\* \* \* \* \*

When she awoke, she was ravenous, and headed up-deck again to find something to eat. When she arrived at the NCO open mess on Z-Deck — a more informal and relaxing place to eat than the Officers' Club — she found a note addressed to her tacked on the door at her eye-level. She read it slowly, puzzling out the wretched script.

Watcher--

The senior cook has a gift for you.

It was not signed with a name, but with a simple line-drawing of the pipes that had drawn her out of exile. \*Now what has he done for me?\* She padded over to the senior cook, whom she had met before.

He saw her coming, and smiled. "Just a micron," he called, waving a hand at her as he turned to go back into the kitchen.

\*Certainly.\* She sat down to wait, carefully tucking her tail around her forepaws so no one would step on it. People gave her a wide berth, and she heard, without intending to, the wave of comment that her mere presence inspired.

Then she saw the chief cook returning, and gasped in amazement. \*Is that for me?!\*

"Sure is. Where do you want it?" he asked jovially. He and another man were carrying a platter that held a huge, steaming haunch of raw meat.

\*On the floor...in a corner where I won't be in the way...?\*

"Okay... How 'bout here?"

\*Fine. Thank you...\*

They deposited the huge meal by the nearest wall and moved aside so she could reach it. They beamed proudly, but she hardly noticed; nor was she aware, except marginally, when they left her in peace. The meat wasn't natural, of course — the lack of proper detail on the bone betrayed its culture vat origins. But it looked, smelled, and, best of all, tasted like freshly-killed meat.

\*I don't know how he did this, but it's amazing,\* she carolled to herself. \*This is magnificent! Especially after almost ten days of the d'mruk they call food!\*

Allahara didn't realize the impression she was making on the other people in the room. Even though Commander Christopher had broadcast a ship-wide announcement to the crew so no one would mistake her for an escapee from the zoo, almost no one had ever seen her before. She was a startling — and frighteningly feral — sight, and she unnerved a good many of the Colonials who watched her enjoy her gift in true Culath fashion.

She was humming a quiet song of satisfaction and repletion, leisurely licking the blood off her forepaws, when she happened to glance up at the rest of the room. Her song caught in her throat. There were fewer than half as many people as there'd been when she arrived, and most of those remaining were staring at her with expressions ranging from disgust to outright fear.

She stood in one liquid motion, facing them all unflinchingly, unaware of just how untamed and formidable she appeared to the Colonials.



joan  
© 84

\*Manners vary from world to world and race to race,\* she broadcast loudly enough for everyone present to hear. \*But where I came from, it was standard practice not to stare at a guest.\*

Reaction to her statement ranged from alarm to embarrassment, but she was angry at herself for letting them irritate her. \*After all,\* she reminded herself, \*they cannot help it if they are so unsophisticated, for they have had so little contact with other races.\* She bent to pick up the half-cleaned bone in her massive jaws, and headed for the door, walking with an unintentional swagger. The crowd split to give her a clear path, and no one deterred her.

She took the bone back to her quarters and laid it on top of the refrigerator; she didn't want it to get cold. Then she went out again. She needed room, for she wanted to pace, and her quarters were too small. She was more upset by the attitudes of the other diners than she had been by anything else aboard the OSIRIS.

\*The Piper warned me about this,\* she remembered. \*He said that they might think of me as a lower animal, rather than a sentient. But he was convinced that they would like me as an animal, even if they had some difficulty accepting my sentience. He was, apparently, mistaken on that count, for even the members of his own mess were horrified.\* She shuddered; fear bred hatred, and the history of the Culath was scarred by several attempts at genocide, both on neighbouring worlds and on Uylenden itself.

\*And here, I am alone, separated from all my people... They could kill me easily enough. I have no weapons but my own body and my poorly-honed Skills. No one to remember me, or to quiet my wandering ghost...\*

She paid no attention to where she was going. She simply agonized over what she could or should do, and she shivered with new-found fear at the realization of her own helplessness.

She had no idea where she was when the sound of someone crying interrupted her preoccupation with her own misery. \*Crying...? I know who that is...\*

True to her training and her personal predilections, Allahara forgot all about her own distress in order to discover what she could do to help the other. It took her only a moment or two to track the sound of the sobs to their source.

In the small sentiology lab, sitting in front of her easel, staring at it without seeing it, her hands clenched into white-knuckled fists, sat the female she had met in Life Centre that morning. Her thoughts were much too upset for the concerned Culath to make any sense of them, so the feline slipped silently into the room.

\*Karl...?\*

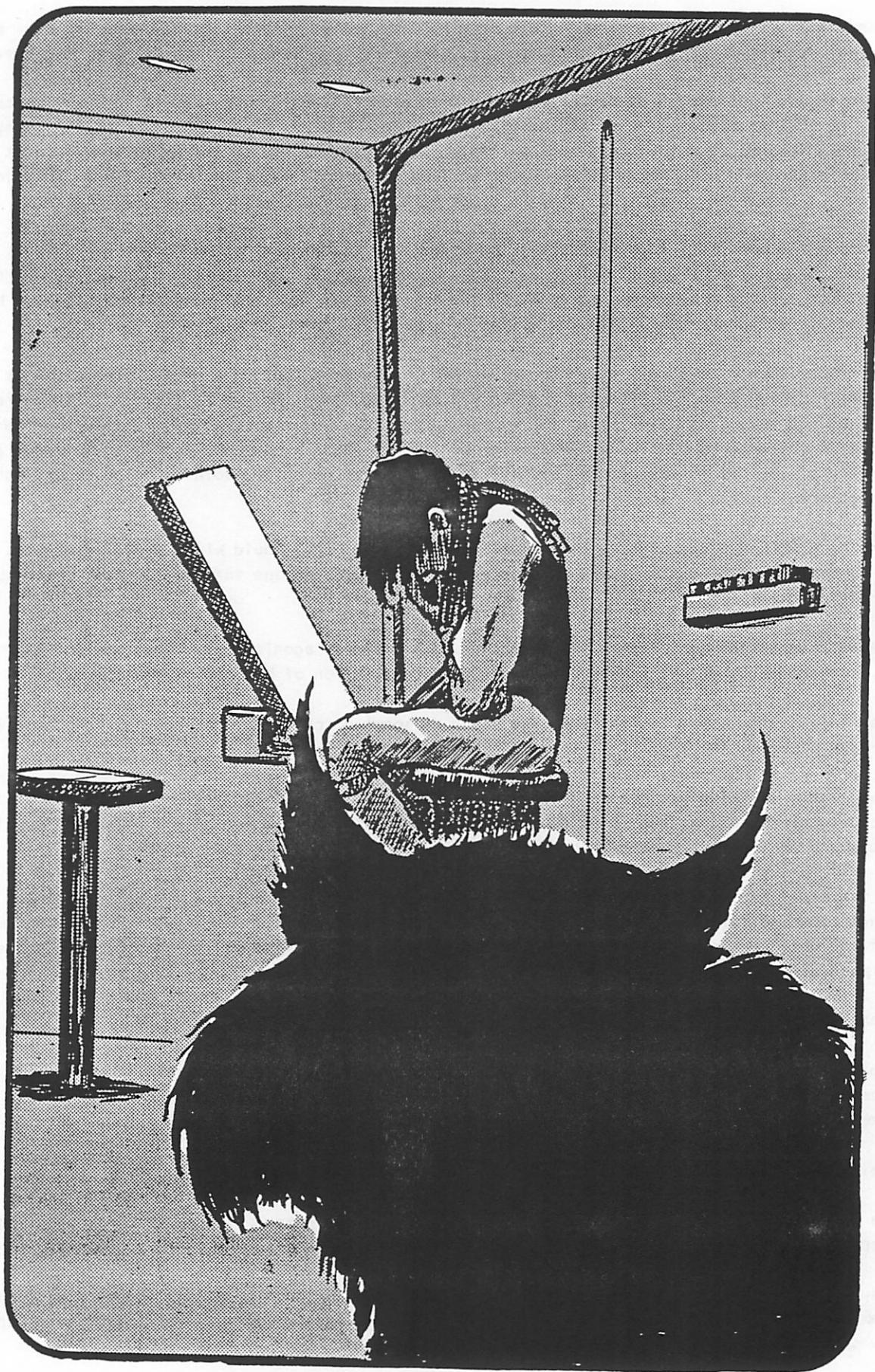
The woman spun around with a cry, almost frightened, but too upset to have room for any emotion other than the grief to which she had temporarily given way. She recognized the Culath immediately, and tried to force a smile of welcome.

"Hello, Allahara. Wh-whatever are you d-doing here?"

She affected a human shrug. \*I am not exactly sure where I am. I was brooding, and I thought I heard someone...in distress. Is something wrong?\*

"Why, no, I'm fine, really." Karl's smile was almost authentic, and Allahara growled suddenly, deep in her throat. The Corellian frowned — Allahara very seldom vocalized, and she'd heard some





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of the pilots debating about whether she was capable of it at all. "What's wrong with you?"

She shook herself violently. \*I...zshaazs!!! I do not understand these people we find ourselves amongst, Karl. You have been with them longer than I -- do you understand what motivates them? I confess I do not.\*

Karl cocked her head to one side. "What happened t'you?" she inquired, pointedly accenting the pronoun.

Allahara told the tale of her meal. \*The chief cook and his assistant are friendly. The Piper is friendly. There are Freya, and Tanis, and Alexandra... I do not consider Morgan unfriend. But the NCO mess stared at me as if I were some sort of undomesticated animal. Some of the warriors seemed almost prepared to draw on me -- and all I was doing was eating...!\* She turned pleading eyes on the Corellian. \*Is it because I am furred? Or a quadruped? Or is it because I am not verbal? Why?\*

Karl's response was slow in coming, and her words were gentle. "It's not that easy, Allahara. For all their might and the ancientness of their race, they're really only twelve worlds' refugees, running from an enemy so powerful that they literally can't fight it. Every other race they've ever met, as near as I can tell -- and I've been working with their sentiology department for months -- has been either aloof from alliance or an outright enemy, already allied with the Cylon Empire. One on one, they can rise above it; your list of friends is an example. But in groups, and as a whole, they are the spookiest, most paranoid people I've ever met, and I've been a spacer most of my adult life."

Allahara didn't reply immediately. \*I did not know that,\* she admitted finally. \*But that does explain why I have felt an aura of buried, subliminal grief pervading every corner of this ship. They have all lost their homes, have they not?\*

Karl nodded. "None of 'em are terribly anxious to talk about it. Before I learned their language -- when I was first brought on board, in fact -- they told me in pictures about the Destruction, trying to ask if I was a refugee from the Colonies, too. Later, when I was more fluent, I asked a few questions, and now, I listen to the talk in the Club, 'cause people talk when they're drunk, sometimes about things they won't discuss any other time."

"Near as I can make out, everyone on board lost someone or something dear, even if it was only the home that can now live only in memory; there's not even enough left to fuel day-dreams."

"It must've been terribly traumatic. They were on their way home after a four-year-long exploratory mission, and instead of homes and happy families, they found their entire civilisation utterly destroyed, with only scattered survivors left to tell them of a massive Cylon betrayal, and of the 'Exodus of the Survivors,' led by the GALACTICA, the sole survivor of the massed Colonial Fleet."

"OSIRIS is following the GALACTICA, just trying to survive, knowing they can't really expect to catch up, though it's possible, and picking up after the GALACTICA, who spends most of her time running and trying to protect her unarmed fleet from the Cylons. They're surviving, I think, mostly on faith and hope."

There was a long silence, then Allahara sighed. \*I suppose that does make sense... Thank you, Karl. I do understand them better, now. I am, I think, a bit over-sensitive. I am unused to coping with people. My shipmates and I were almost a family -- we had been outbound for five years, and we did not expect to turn for home for at least another two or three. Dealing with a small circle of kin-close friends is different from coping with thousands of strangers of a

strange species.\*

The woman nodded, and her mood darkened. "It's different from my galaxy, too. There, we've been travelling through space and hyperspace for so long that no one remembers, now, what world invented the Drive. The Empire rules, or professes to rule, all but a few insignificant fringe worlds. There's the Rebellion, challenging their rule..." Karl's hand dropped to touch the bright silver buckle she wore, "and the independents who scrape out a living from the crumbs that're left after the Corporations're finished..." She shivered, hugging herself as if cold, and Allahara moved a step closer, drawn by the other's pain.

\*I think that you are not too much different from our hosts,\* she suggested gently. \*You, too, are lost from your home. Is there no way for you to return?\*

"Yes!" Karl leaped to her feet and stood, trembling with the effort to control herself. "Yes," she repeated. "My ship made a misjump. I was ejected in a life-pod after we fell sub-light. After! I know it! Alix is out there somewhere, in a probably crippled ship, without a navigator! The poor fool couldn't find his way from bow to stern without me..."

She shuddered, then twitched, startled, as the Culath deliberately mimicked a bast's affectionate rub against her legs. Allahara's heavily-plumed tail curled around the woman like a gentle, tender hug, and Karl fell to her knees. She threw her arms around the feline's luxuriantly-furred neck, buried her face in the thick black mane, and sobbed.

Allahara made no attempt to stop her, but shared the Corellian's grief and helpless frustration; she curled around the human, purring. Eventually, Karl ran out of tears and sat up, wiping her face on her sleeve.

"I'm sorry, Allahara." Her tone made it clear that she was ashamed of herself for losing control.

\*There is no shame in grief,\* the Culath said softly, nuzzling the woman's damp cheeks. \*At least, you can hold some hope against utter despair; your mate may still be alive — indeed, if the ship survived the misjump long enough to launch a life-pod, it may not have been seriously damaged at all. I saw my mate killed. Your Alix may still be alive.\*

Karl opened her mouth to speak, and sneezed instead. "Oh, no!" she cried in dismay.

\*What's wrong?\*

She tried to answer — and sneezed again. She fumbled in a jacket pocket for a tissue. "Oh, frak..."

\*You sound like Arion. What is the matter?\*

Karl blew her nose and dabbed fruitlessly at her puffy, watering eyes. Then she stood up and stepped away. "I'm all right. I'm just... Oh, oh, k'fuz!" She sneezed.

\*Will you stop cursing and tell me what is wrong?\*

"Cursing? You want to hear cursing? I'll give you cursing..."

\*I do not want to hear cursing. I want to know why you are suddenly sneezing all over me!\*

"Oh, I'm sorry, Allahara! But I think you're close enough to being a cat, or a bast, that I'm allergic to you." She punctuated her statement with still another sneeze.

Embarrassed, Allahara backed away. \*I'm sorry... I'll go...\*

"No!" The woman's snarled order was mitigated by yet another sneeze. "No. You c'n come with me..."

\*Where?\* She had stopped retreating, but dared go no closer.

"To the sickbay...Life Station...whatever they call the k'shassan thing! Lupus has medication for this — it happened to me before, when Clem tried to take up residence in my guitar case once. I'll be all right. I just need those tchalg'tn pills!"

\*You are sure?\*

"Positive. No one dies from allergies — y'just wish you could."

Allahara fell in step as Kari hurried past her. \*All right. I assume you know yourself well enough to know when you are really in danger. But aren't those adjectives a bit...imprecise?\*

Kari laughed aloud. "Did you understand them?"

\*I understand nearly all languages. It is a Gift,\* she explained rather offhandedly.

"At last!" Kari crowed triumphantly. "Someone who understands when I call someone a shaivan giast a'kel-hsar zvind'wat!"

\*Kari! I profess to be shocked!\*

"I don't think I could shock you with a negative power coupling," was Kari's only comment.

The Culath chuckled silently, loping along easily beside her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lupus took one look at the miserable Corellian and growled in disgust. "Now what are you allergic to?"

Allahara answered that by peeking into Life Centre, an expression of undisguised worry in her wide beryl eyes.

"Oh, for...! Come along, Kari." He dragged her back into the dispensary, leaving the Culath alone.

Allahara sat disconsolately in the middle of the floor. \*I hope she is all right — she seemed to be having some trouble breathing...\*

"Lahara? 'Zat you?"

The voice belonged to Tanis, and the slur in his words meant he was just recovering from one of Lupus's underhandedly-administered sedatives.

Grateful to hear a friendly voice, the feline padded into his tiny cubicle. \*Yes. I am sorry if I woke you...\*

He smiled rather fuzzily. "No. I was yellin' at Lupus, 'til he cheated an' walked out on me." He studied her almost clinically. "What's th' matter?"

She was startled that he could read her so well. \*Why, nothing...\*

"Don't lie t'me, 'Lahara. Y'left here all bright-eyed an' bushy-tailed, an' now, y'look like y'just lost y'r best friend!"

\*Maybe I did!\* she cried. \*Now, I'll never know!\* Her tail lashed, although the rest of her body stayed rigidly stationary.

The response made no sense to Tanis, who demanded that she explain. She did, feeling guilty all over again — until he began to laugh.

\*It is not funny, Tanis! We were just beginning to be friends!\*

"It's not funny," he agreed, still laughing while he tried to stop so he could breathe. "It's hilarious. Her an' her superior attitude, an' her unpronounceable curse words..."

\*You mean k'shassan? And zvind'wat? And tchaig'tn? I understand them.\*

"What do they mean?" he wanted to know, distracted by the tantalizing presence of a bit of new knowledge.

\*Ask her. I do not use language like that.\*

Tanis glared at her in unmistakable disgust. "You just did."

\*I just did what?\*

"Used 'language like that.'"

\*Language like what? Like how? What did I say?\*

He opened his mouth to answer, then snapped it shut again — he couldn't pronounce the Corellian words. The Lords knew he'd tried, especially when Karl truly irritated him.

He was rescued by the appearance of Karl herself. She was still sniffing, and her eyes were still puffy and red, but she was smiling.

"Thanks, Doc!" she called to the medic who had stopped at the door to the dispensary.

"Don't call me that!" Lupus snarled. Then he caught sight of Allahara and Tanis, both watching him through the doorway of the tiny cubicle, uninhibitedly amused. "And you! Out! This is supposed to be Life Centre — not the zoo! And you..." he turned, finally, on his patient, "are supposed to be asleep!"

"How c'n anybody sleep through all this yellin'?" Tanis asked innocently.

Lupus just stared at him for a moment. Then his face started to get very red.

\*Uh, Karl...? Let's get out of here,\* Allahara suggested hurriedly.

\*That's right,\* she heard Tanis call to her. \*Abandon me here under fire!\*



\*I am sure you can handle him, Tanis,\* she said sweetly. \*You are sick; when you get tired of listening to him rant, faint on him.\*

\*No, thanks,\* came the answer. \*But maybe I'll faint on the bed.\*

\*That will probably do. Good luck.\*

She heard him growl in response, then abandoned contact with him to listen to Karl.

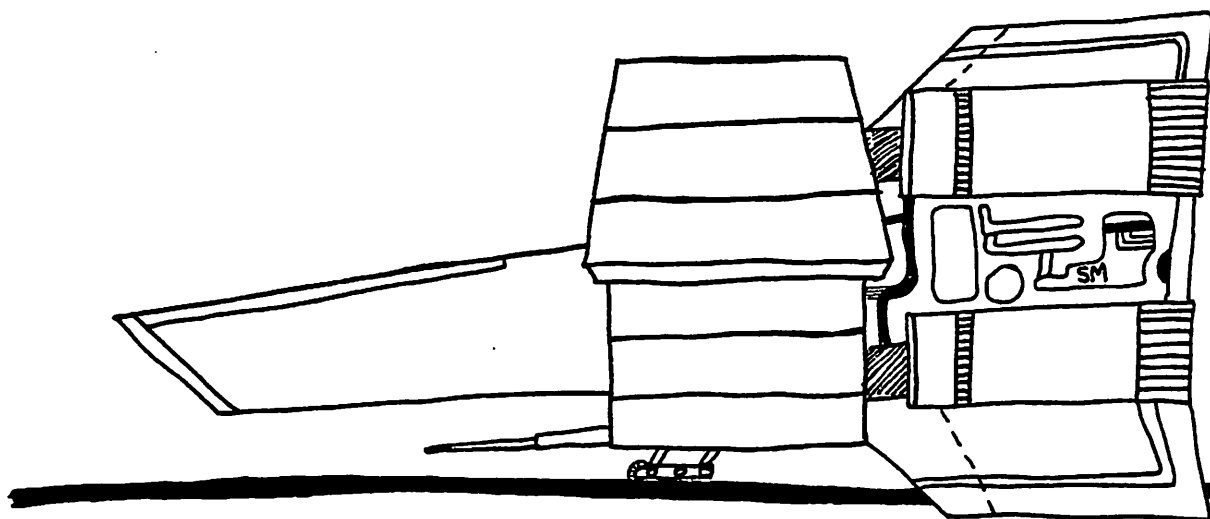
"Y'know, I'm beginning to think the two of them rather enjoy all that fighting," the woman observed. "It gives 'em something to do. What would Lupus do without someone to yell at?"

\*Have a stroke, and die of acute frustration,\* Allahara replied. \*He should thank Tanis.\*

With that thought, the OSIRIS's two resident aliens adjourned to the Officers' Club, where the entirety of the tale found ready listeners. Robin dug around in her stash of Byzellian artifacts, finally finding a stemmed porcelain goblet big enough for Allahara, and Hannibal filled it with M'dori.

A lot of M'dori and ambrosia flowed through the room, while Karl and Allahara wrote a very rude song — in Corellian — about an over-excitabile doctor and a cantankerous patient. They laughed themselves sick over their song, totally mystifying everyone else in the room.

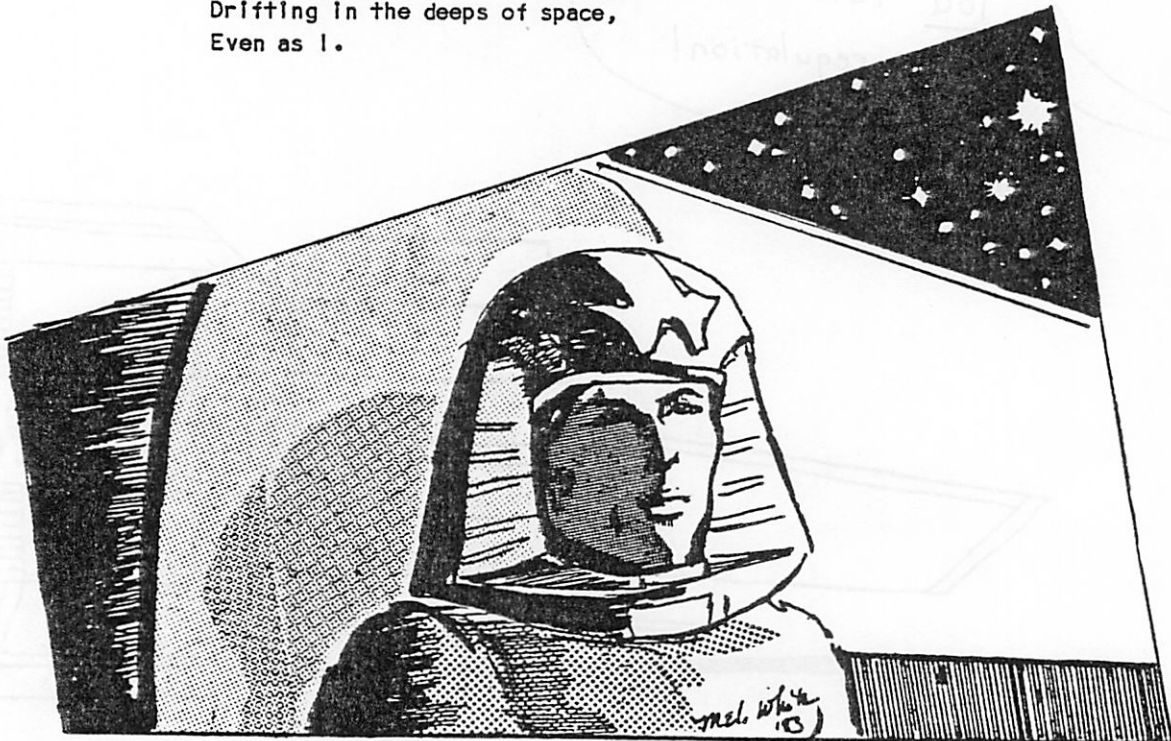
You tell him it's  
not regulation!



## "Soliloquy of a Viper Pilot"

(By Karen Welkert)

Drifting in the deeps of space,  
The Fleet a cluster of lights on the screen,  
I've spent so many centars out here  
Waiting in the quiet of my Viper  
For something to happen,  
Watching the screen for Cylons,  
And hoping they won't appear.  
I've already beaten the odds.  
The life expectancy of a Viper pilot is twenty-six yahrens,  
And I'll be thirty in a section.  
Is that why the quiet drifting of patrol attracts me?  
Am I trying to forget the dead,  
Forget that I fly on borrowed time?  
I was there when the ATLANTIA died;  
I flew cover for the evacuation of Caprica;  
I've fought in every battle of the retreat,  
And I'm tired.  
I need to believe that Earth is out there,  
Drifting in the deeps of space,  
Even as I.



# The ULTIMATE VICTOR



by Mary S. Jones

## "The Ultimate Victor"

(By Mary S. Jones)

A wrecked Cylon shuttle, no signs of life... But then Apollo and Starbuck found her — a beautiful young blonde woman, encased in a battered cryogenic tube. She was alive, and seemed unharmed, but could remember nothing.

Or almost nothing. She remembered her name -- Marisoo. And she remembered her father. His name was Baltar.

With Commander Adama's permission, and with the assistance of Apollo and Starbuck, Marisoo trained to become a Viper pilot, and joined the elite Speciality Squad. Then, when her two friends disappeared on a simple contact mission, she had to take a Viper after them.

She found their shuttle sunk in the middle of a lake. After rescuing the two near-drowned men and reviving the all-but-dead Apollo, Marisoo began to repair their shuttle. While she worked on the ship, the men set out to complete their assignment.

The two Warriors soon encountered a party of natives, who with a great show of friendship escorted the Colonials to their village and prepared a feast in their honour. A village elder went to Apollo. "You will leave us through the Star Gate... We send you back to your Father..."

They were taking him to die...!

### Part III

It wasn't easy tracking Apollo and Starbuck through the thick underbrush. The trees and vines stared forbiddingly during the entire trip, as if angry that men had passed and scarred them with laser fire to mark their trail; they seemed to reach for her with every slightest breeze. On several occasions, Marisoo took time to shinny up a tree, trying to get her bearings and keep her directions — and trying to get a breath of fresh air after the humid closeness below. It was while nestled high on a waving, leafy platform of living wood that she first spotted the city. It wasn't difficult to determine that her shipmates had been headed straight for the grey stone structures. After that, she was able to pick up her pace, having a definite goal in sight.

Then the sun set, and it became harder again; she floundered through the thick brush, almost losing the trail several times as she pushed on. When the stars came out, she discovered with

relief that the distant city walls reflected the light, and she breathed easier -- she could still follow her friends.

Her frequent attempts to contact Apollo and Starbuck were met with unhelpful static. Fearful, she tried to be especially careful and quiet -- a difficult task, as she stumbled over extended roots and blundered into thick leafy plants, but her caution was rewarded when she found a clearing at the base of the city walls.

From her hiding place in a tree overlooking the clearing, Marisoo saw a primitive town huddled against the wall. She also saw that the city was nothing but empty ruins. The situation surprised her. They'd expected to find a living, flourishing society, not the degenerating remnants of former greatness. Was this what had happened to the Thirteenth Tribe of Kobol? Were these few half-naked humanoids the only survivors of their space-faring brothers? She shuddered.

Then she heard the music -- wild, syncopated, with exotic rhythms weaving through it, played on instruments she couldn't begin to identify. She thought about going closer, then realized that the noise -- along with most of the village's population -- was approaching her. She remained motionless, huddling among the large fan-like leaves of her tree.

There were more people than she'd thought! -- there was actually a crowd assembled, still chanting, singing, and playing their instruments. She was glad they were celebrating something, and appeared to be drunk; if they'd been going about their usual activities, they'd have noticed her. As it was, she should be safe...

Marisoo gasped in dismay as she realized the first group of natives was carrying an inert human figure -- Starbuck, unconscious, unable to defend himself. What had they done to him? Her instincts had been right; there was danger here for the Colonials, and Starbuck was a prisoner. But where was Apollo?

A glance at the next group of people told her. They were dragging someone along. Apollo was being far less cooperative than Starbuck; she could see him struggling, although feebly, as if drugged or in some sort of daze. Even as she watched, someone struck him; he collapsed, and the natives lifted him in the air and hurried on their way, with the rest of the villagers scurrying along behind.

Marisoo released her pent breath, wondering desperately what was happening to her friends, and how she could help them. She watched helplessly as they were carried toward and through a wide gap in the city walls, and thought of following, but armed men took up guard positions in front of the rotted wooden beams that littered the gateway.

There had to be another way -- and she had to find it quickly. There was no way of knowing what the natives intended for Apollo and Starbuck, but whatever it was, she suspected it wasn't good, and she doubted she had time to go around the city and look for another gate. Even if she found one, the city was probably a maze of streets, buildings, and what looked like dark chasms. She'd never find her way back -- not in time, anyway.

Inspiration struck -- thick branches hung over the sturdy stone walls! Perhaps she could just drop over the walls, if the branches were heavy enough to bear her weight that far out on the limb...

Several moments later, she regretted her choice, as she clung precariously to several vines twined about her branch. The tree swayed in the evening breeze, and it seemed a very long way to the ground. Fortunately, the wall was broad at that point -- perhaps there'd been a guardhouse in some previous brighter era -- and she could drop onto that vantage point, then find a way down.



She took a deep breath and dropped from the branch. With a jolt and a grunt, she landed on the hard rock, nearly rolling off the edge before she caught herself on a projecting stone. The stone was a blessing in more ways than one. She was able to fasten a loop of vine to it, and lower herself over the edge of the wall, clambering down the uneven surface with a skill she'd never realized she possessed.

Where to go now?

From the shadows of the wall, Marisoo flitted across a plaza, her own shadow vanishing quickly behind an ornately carved wall. She hugged the building edge as she ran toward the sound of trampling feet. The voices and music had stopped; for a few microns, she lost her bearings, but quickly regained her sense of direction.

There! She saw a group of men approaching, and willed herself to become a part of the city itself as she ducked into an alley. She scarcely breathed as they passed within a few metres of her hiding place, waiting in utter silence and absolute motionlessness for the second group she knew had to be close behind.

Marisoo felt like screaming as the long centons passed slowly by. She tried to force her impatience to go somewhere else, but curiosity eventually won out. She moved stealthily to the opening between the buildings, and peered out into the street.

There was no one!

Where had the others gone?

They must've split up, she thought, feeling a moment's panic. She believed she could follow the first group of natives without difficulty -- but what about the others? She'd recognized Starbuck's captors, and had seen the Lieutenant among them -- but what had happened to Apollo? Where had they taken the Captain?

The weird chanting began again, and Marisoo ducked back into the alley, her heart pounding furiously as she clapped a hand over her own mouth to prevent the scream she could feel growing in her throat. Oh, that sound!

Instinct told her to move; there was a growing urgency about the situation, fueled by the droning, almost religious intonations. Perhaps it was religious, a ritual of some kind? That worsened the danger. She hated the idea of facing a mob of primitive fanatics. But what choice did she have?

Well, she knew where Starbuck was, and could follow him. If she took the time to try and track Apollo, she might lose both of them in the ominous maze of the city.

She flitted out into the night, moving on small, cat-like feet as she trailed Starbuck and his captors. She was unseen -- and filled with a dreadful sense that time was running out.

\* \* \* \* \*

On the bridge of the GALACTICA, Marisoo's first communique was received with horror, but word that the men were alive lessened the tension.

Nearly a day had passed since then, and with no further information on the mission's status, people were getting worried again. The Commander had scarcely left the command deck, and the entire bridge area was crowded with friends of the missing personnel, all waiting anxiously.

Athena, Rigel, and Omega had stayed on past the end of their normal duty shifts, and Colonel Tigh was back at his post after only the briefest of rest periods. Of the pilots, Sheba, Bojay, and Jolly were present, and it was a toss-up as to whom they were most concerned about -- Apollo, Starbuck, or Marisoo.

"Anything?" Tigh asked tensely, gazing over Omega's shoulder.

The Flight Officer looked up and shook his head. "Nothing new, sir." He rubbed his tired eyes; he'd been on duty too long.

Adama overheard the exchange, and sighed. Cadet Marisoo had reported that his son and Starbuck were still alive, and were continuing their mission, but could her report be believed? Were they really all right? After such a crash...

Athena took his arm. "Father?" she queried huskily, searching his face with worried eyes. He could see how fatigued she was, and how concerned about her brother, her love, and her new friend.

He shrugged, shaking his head, and her shoulders drooped as she passed his response to her friends waiting at the door. They exchanged troubled glances, then resumed their whispered conversation.

A moment later, the door opened behind them, and Doctor Salik strode onto the bridge, Cassiopeia following closely behind.

"Commander, may I speak to you? It's urgent, about that disease."

Adama saw the tired worry in the doctor's face, mirrored in Cassiopeia's blue eyes. "What is it?" he asked, his voice as low as the medic's. Tigh moved to his Commander's side.

"We've an epidemic on our hands," Salik declared starkly.

"What?" Tigh demanded.

The doctor nodded, locking stares with the GALACTICA's Executive Officer. "Confirmed. Half our pilots are down with it, including Boomer, Giles, and Cree, and it's spreading to the civilian population. I don't know what it is yet, and I don't know how to fight it."

"Any predictions on its progress?" Adama asked wearily. Another problem to deal with, and an epidemic was the very last thing he needed at the moment.

Salik shook his head wordlessly. The strange fever, with its accompanying delusions, was knocking out both Warriors and civilians, and it was totally beyond his experience.

"Keep me informed," the Commander said hollowly. Then he turned away, to once again stare unseeingly at Omega's scanner screen. The younger man wiped beads of sweat from his forehead.

Apollo and Starbuck both, Adama thought. It would be painful enough to lose either of them, devastating to lose both. And there was a Cadet involved, too, young Marisoo, possibly the daughter of the traitor Baltar. Losing her would hurt, too, almost as much as losing his own daughter.

He noticed that his Flight Officer was trembling. "Omega, are you all right?"

The young man glanced up at him, then rose unsteadily, reaching for the back of his chair for support. "I...I feel so hot... I think I'm..." He collapsed on the flight deck.

"Salik!" the Commander shouted, his voice ringing over the bridge.

The doctor was there in a micron, bending over Omega's prone body. "Fever, same symptoms as the others... Cassie, get a stretcher up here on the double — and tell them he goes into quarantine, like the others!"

Omega was muttering incoherently as he was carried from the bridge. The others watched in grave silence. An epidemic had reached the bridge crew; who would be next to fall ill? Could they work their way through this new disaster? Several turned to stare at Adama, their trust in the Commander suddenly shaken as they realized that he, too, might fall victim — he'd been standing next to the stricken Omega.

They didn't even know yet if this strange disease was fatal. It had appeared, seemingly from nowhere, during the past twenty-four centars, starting slowly, with scattered cases of fever, delirium, and a strange red mottling that spread over the entire body. It had swept rapidly through half the pilots, and had infected several of the civilian population. Fortunately, it was presently confined to the GALACTICA, and the battleship herself was under quarantine at Salik's orders. But had the doctor acted soon enough to contain the disease?

And could the Fleet survive if it lost its protectors?

\* \* \* \* \*

Marisoo peered across a plaza at the blank facade of the windowless building into which Starbuck had been carried. The Cadet had already circled the small structure, moving quickly but cautiously in the darkness. The single door opposite her was the only apparent means of entrance and egress — and it had been left unguarded.

As she watched from her perch in an empty window of a nearby tower, she saw four men emerge from the building; six had entered. That meant two still stood guard over her friend.

After several centons, she concluded that the other men weren't going to leave. There hadn't been time for them to do anything to their prisoner, and Marisoo determined not to give them further opportunity. She left her tower, stumbling over a piece of rubble, and froze, fearful that her misstep would mean her discovery, but no one came to investigate the slight sound. It took several moments for her heart to stop pounding; then she went on.

Laser drawn, she stepped into the blackness of the small structure, her eyes straining in the dark, her ears listening for anything suggesting human movement. In only microns, her eyes detected light, and she realized it filtered through to her from somewhere ahead, but not directly into this antechamber.

She took several more cautious steps, reached a corner, and flattened herself to the wall to slink furtively past it. If she read the shadows correctly, the light source should be just around that next bend...

And it was. Cadet Marisoo studied the scene. Two armed men stood before a barricaded metal door, torches blazing behind them in matching alcoves on either side. She halted when she heard one of them speak, surprised that she recognized the language.

"We are left here while the Lord is sealed within his tomb! We miss the great sealing!" one said, obviously resentful of their duty.

"Ah, but we will participate in the ceremony opening the Sky Gate, in the Temple, with the blood of the sacrifice," the other replied placatingly.

"True," the first agreed more cheerfully. "We will send him to prepare the way."

"Bloodthirsty savages!" Marisoo muttered indignantly. Imagine, being pleased at being permitted to kill a man! But what did it mean, "sealed within his tomb," and "send him to prepare the way"? Hopefully, the guards would say more, and soon. If Apollo was already sealed up in a tomb, it was too late to help him, unless the phrase was only a figure of speech, some token ritual...

"The herbs will assure that the sacrifice sleeps until his time," the second man said thoughtfully. "The Lord's Messenger received less, and will waken soon."

"He will wake in his proper place, and will stay until the Ancient Master, the Great Komander, comes to claim him. Then his spirit will depart to the stars, and we will give his body to the consecrated fire." The first man sounded quite satisfied with a religion that seemed horribly barbaric to Marisoo. "He will understand what has happened, and will bless his people."

"Fat chance!" Marisoo almost screamed. Instead, she calmly pointed her laser and fired, and the two guards dropped into undignified lumps on the stone floor. There wasn't much time; she ran forward and pulled the wooden beams across the door out of their slots in the wall. The metal door swung slowly in her direction; she grabbed a torch and thrust it into the dark chamber yawning behind the door.

"Starbuck?" she called softly, her voice echoing in the small, enclosed space.

She heard a low groan, and stepped into the room. Starbuck sat against the far wall, shielding his eyes against the brilliance of her torch. He lowered his hand and stared, blinking, at her. "I drank too much," he moaned. "I'm seeing things...or else I died, and you're an angel."

"No," she replied swiftly, hurrying to his side. "You were drugged and brought here. You're all right, but they've got nasty plans for you and Apollo. Come on, we've got to find him."

Starbuck forced himself to his feet, but nearly collapsed, falling against the wall. He shook his head at Marisoo. "I don't think I can manage. I won't be any help to either of you."

"Do you remember anything?" Marisoo took his arm, draping it over her shoulder, and helped him toward the door.

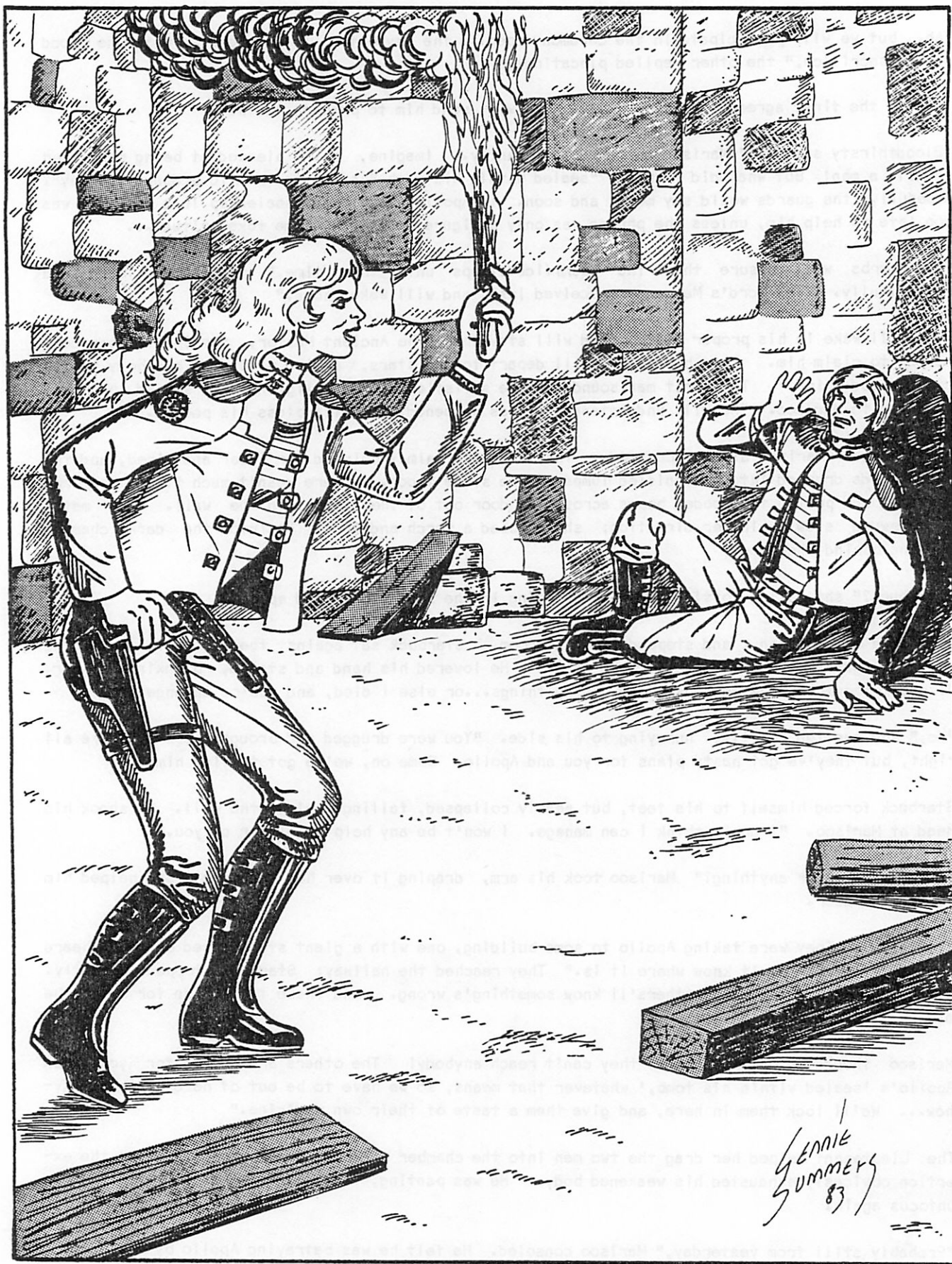
"Vaguely... They were taking Apollo to some building, one with a giant star carved on it; I heard them. It's...I don't know where it is." They reached the hallway; Starbuck stopped abruptly. "If we leave 'em here, the others'll know something's wrong. And these two'll run for help the micron they wake up..."

Marisoo thought fast. "Not if they can't reach anybody! The others are coming for you when Apollo's 'sealed within his tomb,' whatever that means, so we have to be out of here by then, anyhow... We'll lock them in here, and give them a taste of their own medicine."

The Lieutenant helped her drag the two men into the chamber and bolt the door again, but the exertion obviously exhausted his weakened body. He was panting, and his eyes kept threatening to unfocus again.

"Probably still from yesterday," Marisoo consoled. He felt he was betraying Apollo by not helping in the rescue, but Marisoo convinced him that his present state was a more than adequate excuse,







and the two Warriors made their way back to the city wall, where her vine rope still dangled, made fast to the stone outcropping on the guardpost roof.

"You stay here," she told Starbuck. "I'll be back as soon as I've found Apollo, or found out if it's too late..." She turned away.

Starbuck caught her arm. "Marisoo?"

"Yes?" she said, glancing back at him.

He looked down, licking his lips. "You be careful, huh? I want to see you again, okay?"

"Of course, I'll be careful," she said softly, touched by his concern. "And I'll be back -- with Apollo."

Starbuck had a strange look on his face. "I mean it, Marisoo. You're something really special."

"Just wait here. If anyone comes, climb the rope, and pull it up after you. We'll call out when we get here." Impulsively, she kissed his cheek. "You take care as well, Starbuck. You're pretty special, too." She disappeared into the darkness of the streets.

Starbuck stared after her in wonder, a growing grin betraying his elation.

\* \* \* \* \*

Apollo decided being conscious was no more painful than being unconscious, and it was a lot more informative. He vaguely remembered being carried to the mausoleum, and recalled parts of a long-winded ritual, but most of the past few centars was a haze that shifted focus and clarity with every passing micron. As his mind slowly cleared, he began to hope for a chance of escape.

The major obstacles appeared to be the three armed men standing guard over him as he sat in an uncomfortable chair. He could hear chanting from beyond the narrow, curtained door, but the chamber he was in had windows -- high, true, but perhaps reachable. Unfortunately, he was unarmed. His laser was gone, and he couldn't take on three burly men and the old priest by himself -- at least, not without causing enough of a commotion that others would hear. Besides, he wasn't sure he was in control of his body yet.

He wondered what had happened to Starbuck; he didn't know where his friend had been taken, or what the plans for him were, but he was afraid they weren't very pleasant. Starbuck might even be dead already, and he knew that he might very soon be terminated himself.

The priest turned from the stone altar where he'd been praying -- if that singsong litany and frenzied stamping could be called prayer. "It is time for you, Lord."

"Time? For...what?" Apollo forced himself to ask. His mind might be clearing rapidly, but his tongue wasn't obeying him, and he couldn't get up from the chair unsupported.

"For you to join your Father, and be sealed safely in your waiting place, in your tomb," the old man replied sedately.

"That's...the second time...you've said...something about...tombs," Apollo slurred. He could barely feel the guards' hands as they lifted him from the chair. "What...?"

The old man, now dressed in a linen cape as well as his kilt, bowed obsequiously in the direction

of the large star carving that dominated the far wall of the chamber. "The Master of the Stars awaits your coming. When the blood of the sacrifice opens the Sky Gate, you will be free, and your Father will come for you."

How in Sagan's name had such a religion been perpetrated on these people? It couldn't have evolved naturally!

"Blood...of what...sacrifice..." Apollo demanded unsteadily.

"The sun-haired one, your companion. His blood will open the Gate."

Apollo felt his own blood run cold. "What...?"

"You will rest within your tomb," the old priest explained reverently to his unwilling godling. "The sacrifice will be brought here, and his blood given to the stars. You will be sprinkled with it, so your Ancient Father will recognize you when you go to him. Then the tomb will be sealed until you have passed to the stars. Then we will deal with your fleshly remains as we have always done. You will be pleased with us, as your Father has been."

It may have been the drugs, but Apollo felt like crying. Locked in a tomb to die, spattered with his best friend's blood, waiting for the call of a being definitely not his father...

Where had it come from? What if...? The thought chilled Apollo even more. Had Ibils been here?

The old priest stared anxiously at him, and Apollo dragged himself from the demonically alluring thoughts. They were dark and full of destruction, and if he was to die tonight, he wanted to be thinking about something more pleasant.

The old man gestured, and the men supporting Apollo deposited him into the open altar. It was hollow! The chamber within — the coffin within — was wide and long enough to have made a comfortable bed; but it was cold and hard, carved from a block of solid stone. A moment more, and the light was cut off.

Desperately, Apollo shoved against the block of stone that sealed him in, but he couldn't budge it.

So this was it... The air in the coffin already seemed stale and close; the seal was probably near-perfect. In a few centons, Starbuck would be brought in and slaughtered, probably on top of the very stone that entombed him. And then...

"No!" Apollo pounded on the unrelenting stone, but there was no response of any kind. He could only wait, helpless and hopeless.

The stone walls were cold, and he felt a chill penetrating to his very soul. He had to find something pleasant to think about, some memory that would make death easier to bear...

Family? Friends? So many of them were already dead, destroyed with the Colonies and the Fleet; the rest were searching even now for a mythical planet that might — just might — provide a refuge. But some would never reach that place, some like Starbuck, doomed to die here as well...

Dammit, no! This was no way to think...

A sweet memory surfaced at last. Cadet Marisoo still waited on the beach. They'd had a pleasant talk this morning — only today? — about yesterday, about their pasts, about the present...



Apollo sighed. There were so many things they'd never get to talk about, or show each other, or remember... He opened his eyes wide in the darkness. All the things he wanted to say, all the things he'd thought and felt...

A sound reached his ears, a small grating sound, as if someone were trying to move the stone, or had bumped into it... Starbuck? Lords, this was it, then...!

There was no mistaking the sound of the laser, or its heat as the stone above him suddenly glowed red-hot — and vanished, with only a sprinkling of dust to mark its passage. Apollo gasped, and found himself face-to-face with a worried-looking young woman.

Her frown faded into a wide smile as he sat up. "Marisoo?" he stammered in disbelief. She nodded.

The world had gone crazy. He grabbed her, hugged her tightly, and planted a kiss full on her mouth as she giggled, returning his embrace.

"You're all right!" she finally managed to whisper when she caught her breath. He nodded in response, but when he opened his mouth to speak, she put her hand over his lips, glancing warningly at the curtain separating this sacred room from the rest of the temple; the chants and screams of the natives still echoed around them, growing more frenzied with every centon. For the first time, he noticed the crumpled body of the priest lying beside his coffin; he raised his eyebrows questioningly.

Marisoo shook her head. "Just stunned," she whispered, then pointed to the window. "We can climb the star rays, and be out of here before they notice anything's wrong."

"But Starbuck..."

"He's already safe, and waiting for us. Let's go!"

Captain Apollo needed no further urging to flee that place of fear and death.

\* \* \* \* \*

On a monitor aboard a special spacecraft — one the GALACTICA's monitors were unable to detect — a figure in black watched dispassionately. Long fingers began to tap a strangely ominous rhythm on the table. The animal crouched at the foot of the well-upholstered couch rose and began to pace, circling the chamber as it went to each of the other figures seated in the scattered chairs.

"Is it complete?" asked one of the others, a being surrounded by the same eerie power as the first.

"No. We will have another trial."

The furred creature returned to settle itself comfortably on an empty cushion on the couch.

\* \* \* \* \*

Adama had given up trying to sleep, and was sitting at his desk, staring at the incoming reports without seeing them. A gentle chime at the door went unanswered until it was repeated a second time. "Enter."

Doctor Salik entered the room, looking as weary as he had a right to be; he'd been awake and on

duty for two straight days.

"Report." Adama's voice held little life, and less hope.

Salik dropped a tape on the desk and sank into a chair, rubbing his face and eyes. "Bad, Commander. Athena's got it, too, and Greenbean and Brie."

"And still no ideas?" Adama'd been afraid when Athena reported feeling faint and hadn't shown up for duty; his worst fears were now confirmed.

"I do have one," the doctor replied unhappily. "There is a common denominator in all this."

"Which is?" A ray of hope -- or their doom?

"Marisoo."

"What?"

"The first cases were from Blue Squadron, people closely associated with the Cadet. The spread to the bridge crew could be through Athena, since she's the girl's roommate."

"That's flimsy evidence to accuse the girl..." Adama began.

Salik held up a restraining hand. "It's still just a guess; I'll need to run tests on her, check her immuno-system. Commander, she's the only new person in the Fleet, the only one who could've carried something on board. And remember how we found her -- the Cylons had her, and she was sealed in a cryogenic tube. It's not a pleasant thought, but I think you have to consider it."

Adama stared at him in sick horror. Could the Cylons have meant for them to find the girl? Could Baltar's ultimate betrayal be to send his own daughter among them, with a virus intended to destroy the Fleet? Athena, and many of the others of his crew, were already ill; and Starbuck and Apollo -- his son! -- were even now with the possible carrier of this contagion!

Could someone so lovely and so innocent be their Destroyer? Was Marisoo a Cylon death-trap?

"Please, Lords, no..."

\* \* \* \* \*

Marisoo kept watch while Apollo and Starbuck ran a quick pre-launch check on their shuttle. It was fortunate she'd remembered to lock their gear inside before going off to hunt for them. It had taken only moments to complete repairs to the damaged circuits, with all three of them working. The men didn't say anything about the sabotage, but the Cadet could see the grim anger on both their faces. Someone back on the GALACTICA would have to answer to that rage; Marisoo was glad it wasn't her.

She glanced quickly around the jungle again. There'd been no signs of pursuit by their primitive captors. Perhaps the natives thought their own gods had descended to take their victims -- or maybe they'd simply been quelled by the Colonials' audacity in escaping. Or maybe they just didn't care...

Marisoo knew their particular skills in woodcraft certainly weren't responsible. Their trail was well-marked -- laser-blasted as it was -- for anyone who might choose to follow it.



She heard footsteps as someone blundered through the native flora toward her perch. "I'm here, Apollo," she called down from her tree branch when the man almost walked past her.

The Captain looked up, grinning when he saw her sitting jauntily above his head. "Hi, Marisoo. We've checked out the shuttle, and it's ready for launch. How about you?"

"I'm Speciality Squad! I'm always ready!" she replied provocatively.

He waited as she clambered down the tree, offering his hand for the last few steps. He seemed unusually thoughtful as she jumped down from his interlocked hands.

"Is something wrong, Captain?" she asked, her anxious eyes betraying her concern. "You said the shuttle was..."

He shook his head. "No, nothing's wrong. Just...uh...Marisoo, I saw the way Starbuck was looking at you on the way back. I know it's really...none of my business...and he's been teasing you for a long time...or maybe more than teasing...I don't know... I'd just like to know -- if it's not too...personal...if there's...something between you?" he finally blurted out. "Not that it's any of my business, or anything, but...I'd just...like to know..."

He seemed to run out of words at last; his voice died away, and he searched her face intently.

Marisoo stared right back. "Why?" she asked simply.

He tried to shrug it off. "Oh, nothing, really. Just...after last night... I've seen the way he watches you, that's all, and...I'm concerned about my friends, and their happiness. Does he...matter to you?"

Apollo looked and sounded very much like a schoolboy. His heightened colour and nervous stammering were both amusing and endearing, and Marisoo almost laughed; but she could see how important her answer was to him. She met his green eyes steadily.

"Not that way," she replied seriously. "I like Starbuck, I really do. He's a very good friend. He's...helped me fit in, taken care of me, like you have. But, no, I don't love him, if that's what you're asking. Not enough for...anything serious, anyway. Not now, at least. He's just a friend."

Apollo, seeming quite relieved, took a deep breath; he was still tongue-tied and embarrassed. "I just wondered." Then he looked away, awkward and unsure of himself. "Uh, we'd better get going. The last thing we need right now is for those people here to see us take off. They'd never understand."

With a warm smile on her face, Marisoo watched him hurry away, leaving her to follow as quickly as she could.

"Oh, Apollo," she murmured, her affectionate expression colouring her features a soft pink, complementing her blonde hair and blue eyes to their best. He was really concerned about her, and about her liking Starbuck -- but as a friend, a very dear friend, but nothing more. Of course, she doubted Apollo was reading Starbuck's feelings for her correctly, anyway; she knew the Lieutenant's reputation. And even if Starbuck really did care about her that much, that way, she couldn't return the feeling; it wasn't right, somehow...

She wondered what Apollo felt for her, and if he understood. She hoped it was right, not a hopeless love...

She couldn't stand to be near him if he didn't love her in return...

A short dash back to her Viper, and it was only centons more before they were all prepared for launch. A few centons more, and the three Warriors were free of the planet's atmosphere and in deep space, heading for the GALACTICA.

"Looks like we're home free," Starbuck commented to Apollo, who was sitting beside him; Marisoo, listening on her Viper's headset, heard him as well.

Apollo nodded affirmatively, a self-satisfied smile on his face. Then, suddenly, he frowned, staring at the shuttle's scanner screen. "What...?"

Marisoo confirmed his fear with an audible intake of breath and a single cry. "Cylons!"

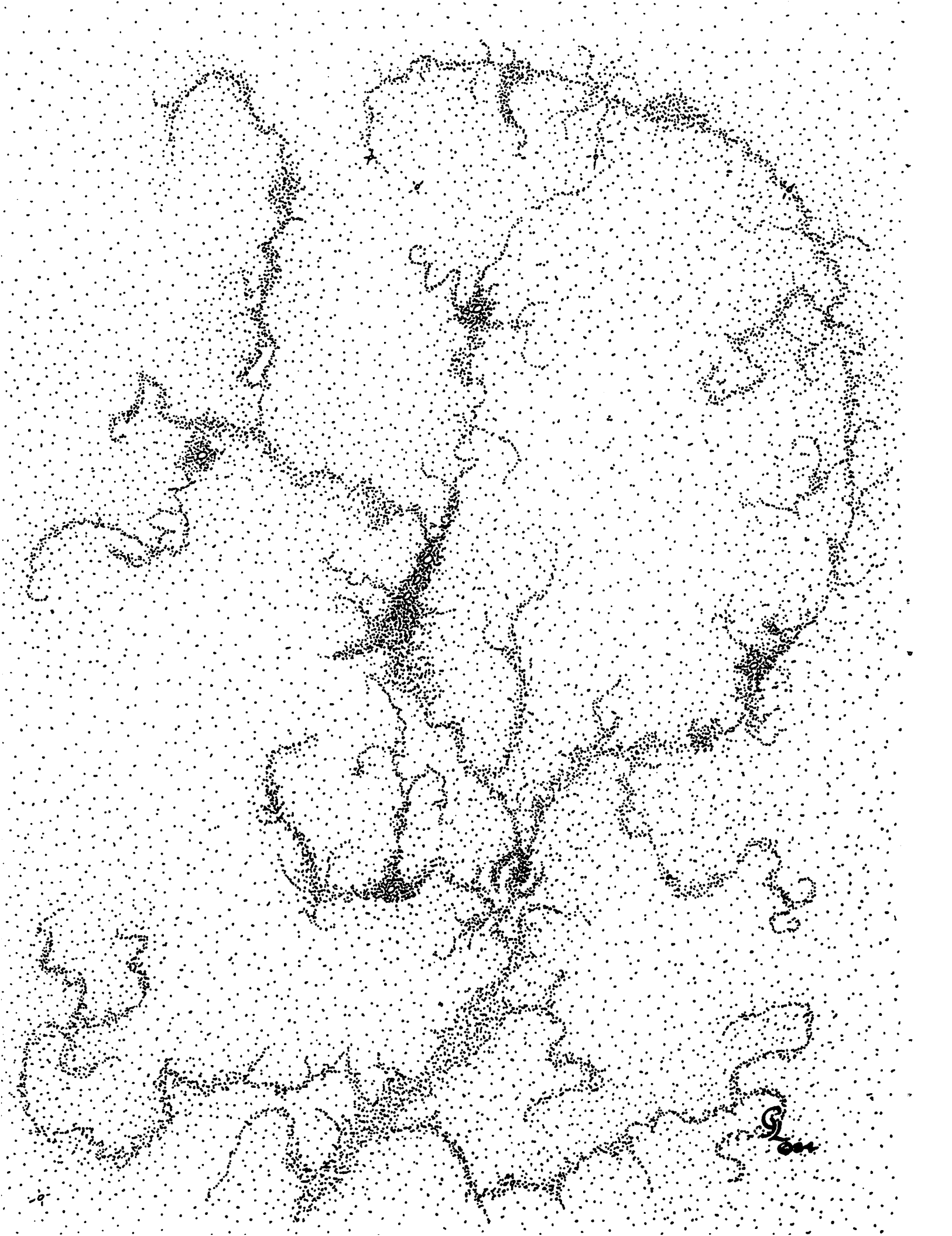
Apollo and Starbuck stared at each other, heartsick. Out of one danger, and straight into even worse trouble. And that sudden screech of static could only mean Marisoo's Viper was no longer capable of transmitting — which probably meant her ship had been destroyed. And they themselves could be only microns from oblivion...

"There!" Starbuck yelled.

The Cylons closed on the helpless shuttle.

(To be continued.)





## MARA'S JOURNAL: Uniform of the Day?

I noticed it the other day, when I was sitting in the Officers' Club having a drink. One of the other pilots, someone I know by sight but not by name, was sitting at the next table with some of his friends. I'd just come off duty, and was relaxing with a glass of M'dori before turning in. I found myself staring at the front of his uniform. Something was wrong, and it bothered me -- ex-Drill Sergeant that I was -- that I couldn't... No, wait! That was it. The quilting -- it was vertical instead of horizontal.

Vertical?

I looked at my glass. It was only my first, and I'd only drunk half of it; it couldn't be that. I rubbed my eyes, but that didn't change anything; maybe I needed to go to Life Centre and get them checked. I tilted my head and looked at him sideways. Now, the bands were horizontal. I tilted my head back, and they were vertical again.

He finally noticed me looking at him. "Sergeant? Is something wrong?"

"Er, your uniform... The front, that is -- the bands, the quilting... What...?"

With the infinite patience of someone who has given the same answer many times too often, he informed me that what he had was what Supply had given him as a replacement, and he was lucky to have it, and what the fark did it matter any more, anyway?

I mumbled some excuse and left.

After that, though, I began taking a closer look at all the uniforms I passed. And I noticed things I never had before. Like patched and mended elbows and knees. Like three different shades of blue, and five different shades of beige. Like collars that didn't quite fit right, and different widths of trim. Like some tunics quilted with wide bands, and some with thin bands, and some with vertical or even star-patterned quilting.

It startled me.

Where has my attention been all this time? I used to read off a member of my drill team if a shoulder patch was a fraction too high or too low; here were uniforms with poor copies of patches, or with no patches at all! And I had never even noticed! At the Academy, we used to get put on report if we weren't wearing the proper Uniform of the Day, right down to the proper belt. Here, I've seen more things used for belts than I care to name.

But why? I mean, the whole purpose of a uniform is so that everyone looks the same -- looks, well, uniform. And mass-producing several hundred or thousand copies of the same identical thing is so much easier than turning out hundreds of different designs, isn't it? Warriors wear battle-dress, techs wear tech smocks, Command wears "Command blue." And that's that. Only the insignia differs. Which is another reason for uniforms -- you can tell at a glance what branch or department someone belongs to, and what rank someone is, by what that person's wearing. You can even tell whether someone is on or off duty, or how sober a person is (you tell that by how

they're wearing their uniform!).

At least, you used to be able to. I've seen pilots report for an alert in every possible combination of the above. The only thing uniform about them is that they wear the same strange combination every time. I've seen uniforms that look like they've been slept in for a section, being put on fresh out of the 'cycler.

Again, why? Are we becoming that lax as a military unit that we don't care any more? Have we been away from the rest of the Fleet for too long? Is it the civilian influence?

No, it is, plain and simple, supply and demand.

I took a good look at my own uniform. My battle-jacket was definitely due for replacement. Both elbows were patched, and the shoulders were wearing thin. I went down to Supply to see about getting a replacement.

"Battle-jacket? Yah, I think I've got some here." The Supply officer hauled an armful of jackets out of a locker and dumped them on the counter, informing me that if I could find one that fit, I could have it.

I dug through the pile. They were all one of two things -- discards, hung away in some Warrior's locker when he got a replacement and later salvaged when the pilot never returned from a mission, or jackets Life Centre salvaged from injured Warriors who later died.

I was shocked at the condition of some of them, and said so. The Supply officer just shrugged, and said that if I wanted a "good one" without laser holes or blood stains, I should go see a black-marketeer.

I gave him a dirty look and shoved the pile back at him. "Come on! I came for a replacement. That means a new one!"

He shrugged again, and tossed me another jacket. Same cut, but filmsier material, of a sickly green colour that was not regulation, even if it was brand new. I told him what he could do with it, and left.

Talking with some of the newer pilots, I found it's the same with all parts of our uniforms. Living on the run, with no supply base to return to, means we have to take what we can find, even if it isn't the proper colour, weight, texture, or even fibre. Also, keeping the navigation, communications, and defensive gear operating is more important than keeping the clothing fabricators in perfect working order. As long as your clothing protects you and differentiates between the military and the civilians, nothing else matters. And even that line is becoming a little bit blurred.

I took another look at myself. My original Academy uniform long ago succumbed to the strain of living off the land for several sectors after the Destruction. The one I've got now is the replacement they issued when I first came aboard the OSIRIS. It was among the last of the pre-Destruction stock issued, before the reserves ran dry. So what if it's a little faded, and a bit thin in places? At least it's clean -- which is more than I can say for Galatea's uniform! -- and it's neatly mended.

Still, I'm a Warrior -- an Academy graduate, even; that's always something special. We're the few who made it. We're respected -- we've earned it, and we take pride in it.

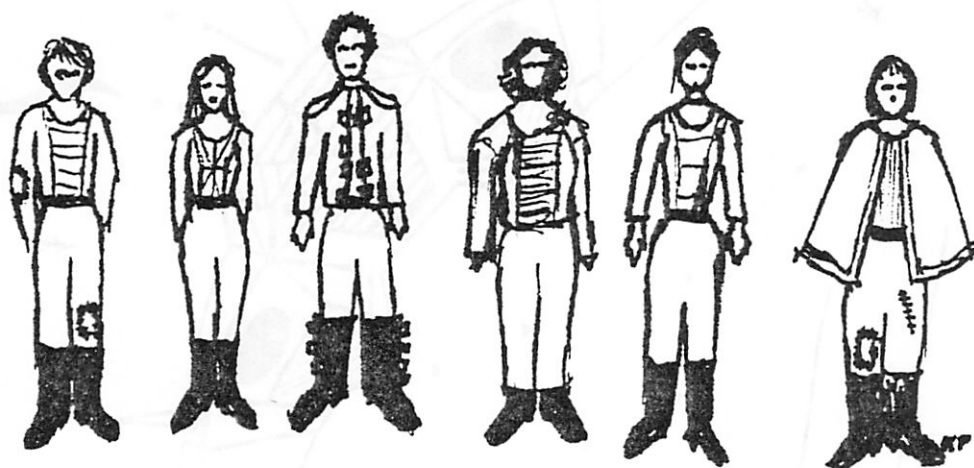
Where has that pride gone? We've lost something...

I listened to the talk in the Officers' Club and in the pilots' quarters, about how many Cylons we've shot down, how we've protected the ship, how we've out-smarted the Cylons yet again...

No, our pride is still there. It's just taken a different, more practical direction.

So my boots aren't always as polished as they could be. Polishing my boots doesn't make me a more skillful pilot, does it? Does having my insignia brightly shined make me more alert?

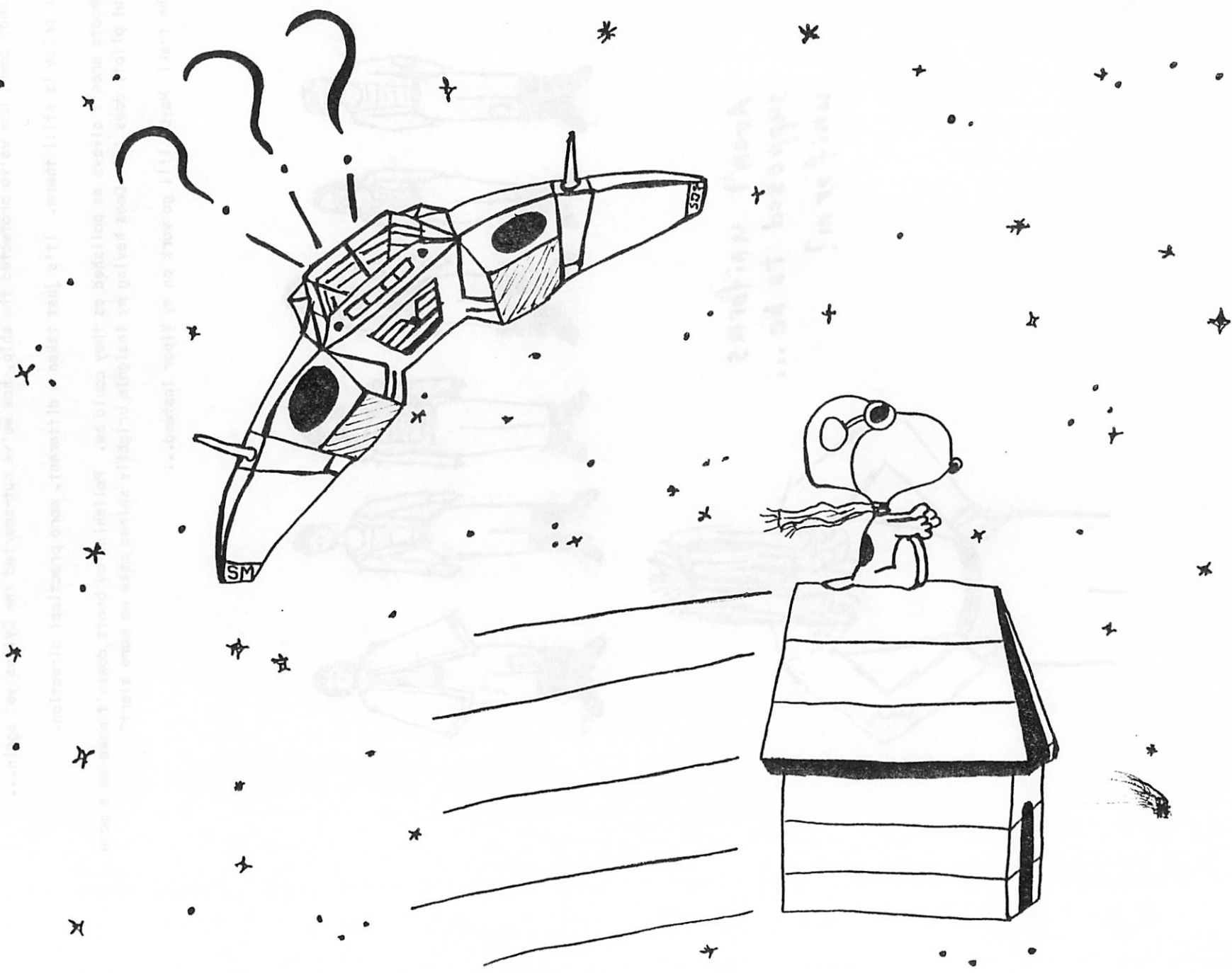
What the frak! Maybe I'll go work on my Viper instead...



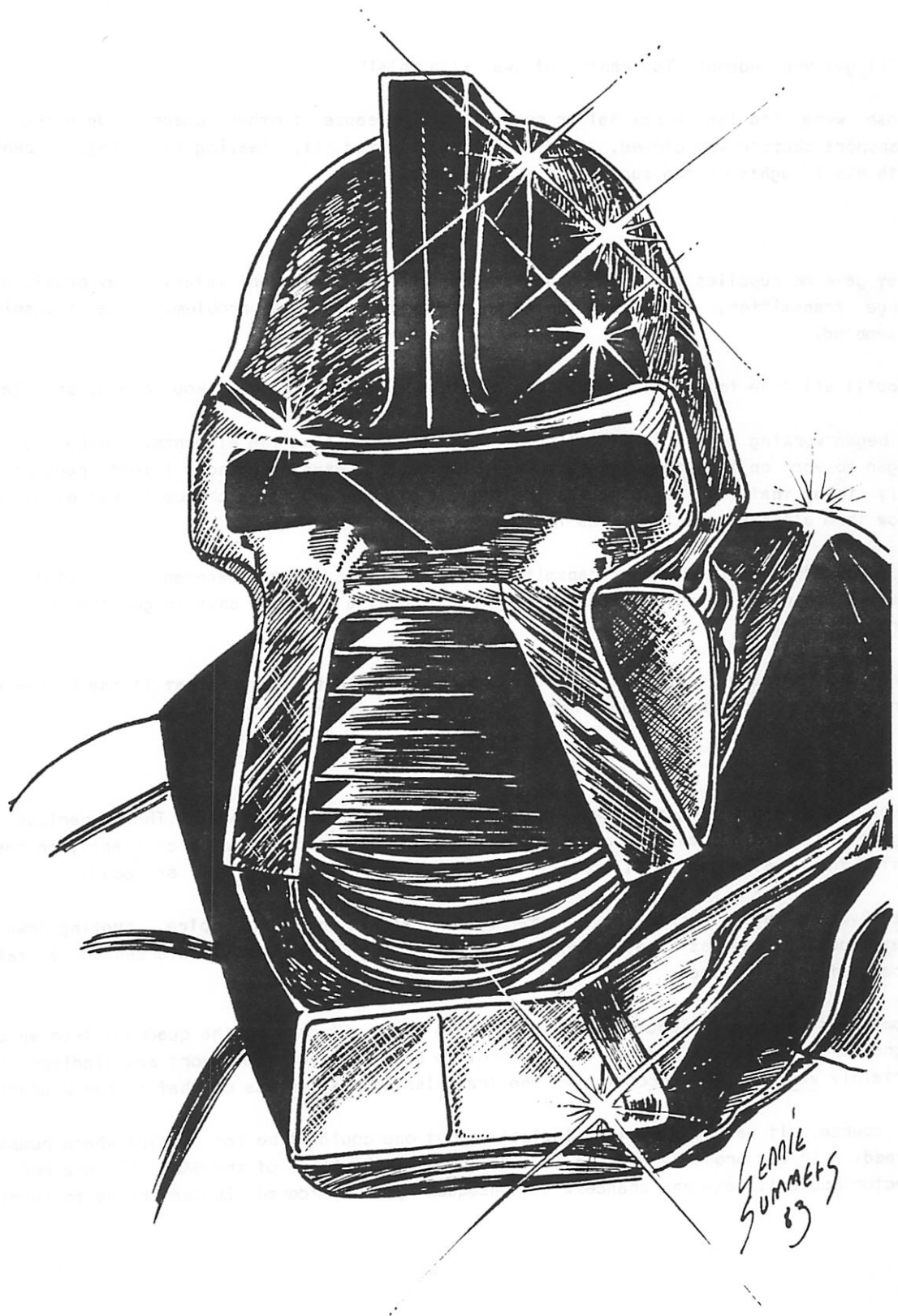
Aren't uniforms  
supposed to be ...  
uniform?







# Lost and Found



## "Lost and Found"

(By Cynthia Greer)

"I'll get you, Adama! You can't get away with this!"

Those were the last words Baltar spoke in the presence of other humans. Once the hatch of the transport shuttle was closed, the small craft blasted off, leaving the renegade behind, alone with his thoughts on the surface of a deserted planet.

\* \* \* \* \*

They gave me supplies to build a shelter, and there was abundant water. They promised me a short-range transmitter, and kept their word -- with only one problem. The transmitter wasn't assembled.

"You'll all live to regret the day you did this to me. Especially you, Adama, especially you."

I began working on the shelter first, for protection from the elements. Once that was done, I began to work on the transmitter. Days blended into days, and soon I lost track of time. The only thing that kept me going was the thought of revenge, of a chance to get even, a chance to show them all how superior I was to them.

My first attempts to get the transmitter to work failed, but I managed to get static, so I knew I was on the right track. After that, it took only a few more days to get the thing into proper working order.

The first message I sent was in Cylon code. I wanted to be sure that if the Cylons were within range, they'd know who was down here -- before they started shooting...

\* \* \* \* \*

Cylon base stars searched everywhere for the missing human Fleet. The Imperious Leader was angered to learn of Baltar's capture, and ordered all outposts to be constantly on the alert. He wanted the Fleet found at all costs. If they found Baltar, too, well and good.

The Cylons began by checking the star systems within their own Empire, hunting down any humans they found. And as they searched for the missing Fleet, they intercepted a faint signal, broadcast in Cylon code.

From ships' records, Spector knew there weren't any outposts in the quadrant from which the coded signal originated. He ordered out a patrol to scan the area and report any findings. That signal certainly was strange; according to the transmission, Baltar was on that barren planet!

Of course, it was completely illogical -- but one couldn't be too careful where humans were concerned. It was probably a trick to lure them off the trail of the GALACTICA and her Fleet, but Spector couldn't take any chances. Consequently, he ordered his Centurions to investigate, and

to bring back anyone they found alive.

The Cylon's reasons weren't entirely logical. He owed Baltar for his very existence, for Baltar had taken him from a dismal wet planet and given him a base star of his own. Illogical though it might be, Spector was grateful.

\* \* \* \* \*

The patrol landed not far from Baltar. He told them he was unarmed, and hoped they wouldn't shoot. They took the renegade human aboard one of their ships; once on board, he seized one of their weapons and destroyed his transmitter. "Take that, Adama!"

The Cylons continued to scout the area, to be certain there was no trap laid for them; once certain there was no one else around, they took off to return to their base.

"We-have-picked-up-Baltar-Commander," the Cylon squad leader reported.

If he had been capable of smiling, Spector would have done so; he was inordinately pleased with himself for sending the patrol.

Not only will Imperious Leader be pleased, but Baltar will be grateful, as well. This might even get me another promotion.

Not only that, but he wouldn't have to worry any longer about Lucifer undermining him.

When Baltar stepped from the patrol ship, Spector was waiting for him. "Your Eminence, I am pleased to have you back among us. Your leadership and guidance have been greatly missed."

"Thank you, Spector. Has the Imperious Leader been informed of my return?"

"Not yet, Your Eminence. I thought you would want to notify him yourself."

"Good thinking, Spector. Your logic and reasoning will carry you far in the Empire."

"Thank you, sir. Now, if you will accompany me, we will see about finding you something more appropriate to wear; a man of your importance should not be seen walking about in rags."

\* \* \* \* \*

Baltar stalked the corridors of the base star, reflecting on his past deeds; his hatred of Adama, and his resentment of the treatment he had received at the hands of his fellow humans, prevented him from reconsidering any of his actions.

"I'll get you, Adama," he muttered to himself. "Your Council will pay for what you did to me. And don't let your precious son wander too far from the Fleet, or you'll lose him forever, I promise you."

His thoughts took another turn. "In one centar, I have a meeting with Imperious Leader. What do I say to him? How can I explain why I left my ship, why I went to the humans? I can't very well tell him that a being of immeasurable power willed me to leave, to go to the GALACTICA, to persuade Adama to attack Cylon. Even if I could convince him that I went to talk the humans into surrender, I failed miserably in doing so, and the Cylons are not forgiving..."

"Well, I'm back, now, and the fault was not mine, not truly. The Cylons are fortunate to have

their finest military leader back...

"At least, I hope they still value me that highly..."

\* \* \* \* \*

One lone human approached the monitor screen that showed the dais on which the leader of the Cylon Empire sat enthroned.

"Greetings, Imperious Leader."

"Baltar." It was a barely civil acknowledgement.

"Leader, about my capture..."

"Were you captured -- or did you seek to betray Cylon?"

"Im...Imperious Leader! I would never betray you!"

"I should hope not. But tell me, Baltar, how I can be sure of your loyalty to me, when you were so eager to plot against your own kind."

There was silence, as Baltar pondered what to say. At last, "If I find and bring to you the remaining humans, so that you may personally destroy them for your own pleasure, will that be enough to prove my loyalty and devotion?"

"I will consider your offer, and will give you my answer later."

It was a dismissal. There was a soft mechanical hum as Spector glided quietly to Baltar's side. "I think, Your Eminence, that you handled the situation very well."

"Do you, now, Spector? Well, if the Imperious Leader does give me back command of the fleet, I will make you my second-in-command."

"You are most generous, Baltar."

\* \* \* \* \*

Several centars passed before Baltar heard the answer he wanted. He was given command of the Cylon fleet, and was assigned the task of finding Adama and the GALACTICA. Spector became his second-in-command, as he had promised. The human liked him; he was a little different from the average Cylon -- crafty, sly, and with a somewhat devious nature -- rather like Baltar himself.

They were scanning Quadrant XL-78 when they spotted a Viper patrol. Baltar ordered an immediate launch, to pursue the humans, find the Fleet -- and destroy them.

"If only Adama's son Apollo is with that patrol! To have his remaining son killed..."

"It will serve you right, Adama. You never should have locked me up. You should have listened to me. Now, you and everyone else in your pitiful Fleet will suffer my wrath. I'll get you, Adama. Nothing can stop me now!"



If I Have a Sneeze  
That Can Move Mountains





"If I Have a Sneeze That Can Move Mountains..."

(By Mary Jean Holmes)

I should know better than to trust my so-called boss in the Sentiology Department. He's glib when he's a mind to be, and has this way of making things sound absolutely wonderful when they're actually the pits. One of these days, I'm going to let him have it -- but that's beside the point.

"Why don't you go with them, Karl?" that miserable excuse for a human being -- specifically, Tanis -- suggested one not-so-fine morning. "It'll do you good, get you off the OSIRIS for a while. Think of it as a vacation."

A real devil, that man, a Dark-Sider if such there ever was. He knew I was going space-happy. Even the most devoted of spacers occasionally find it necessary to put down someplace where there's fresh air, real sunlight, and growing things. I'm not stupid, however; I remained the skeptic. "If it's so fantastic, how come you aren't going?"

He shrugged nonchalantly. "Too much to do here. Besides, they don't need an archaeologist. They're scouting for pharmaceutical bases, not ruins. They need someone to do documentation for them." He gave me a prize-winning grin. "You're a real pro, no doubt about it."

I should've recognized a snow job when I saw it. Dad had warned me about his type, but I was a sucker. It was the first praiseworthy thing he'd ever said about my art, and... Well, the man was a friend, and I did kinda like him... You know how it goes. He sucked me in.

I'm going to kill the tchagran some day -- provided I ever stop liking him.

This little "scouting trip" of his wasn't just a simple hike through the woods and fields, oh, no. Commander Christopher decided it'd make a perfect training assignment for some of their newest cadet-trainees, a thing to give them their first on-planet mission. Just a harmless little excursion...

I felt like I was part of a kiddie-scout camping trip.

Commander Christopher is now second on my hit list.

Now, don't get me wrong. I have nothing against the two officers who were sent along to shepherd the kids and keep an eye on the civilians. Alexandra has that delightful combination of sweetness and spice that makes a person interesting. And Morgan... He's an oddball, that one, even odder than Tanis, but in a way that's distinctly intriguing. He's such an anomaly of the Force... But I'll get to that later.

The cadets were nothing more than kids -- the oldest was maybe seventeen -- who'd been trained to fly Vipers, off on their first trip into the wilds. Two of them hadn't been planetside since they were babes, and one had never touched a planet's soil. I didn't relish the thought of spending two weeks in the middle of nowhere with them, but the Force teaches us patience, if nothing else.

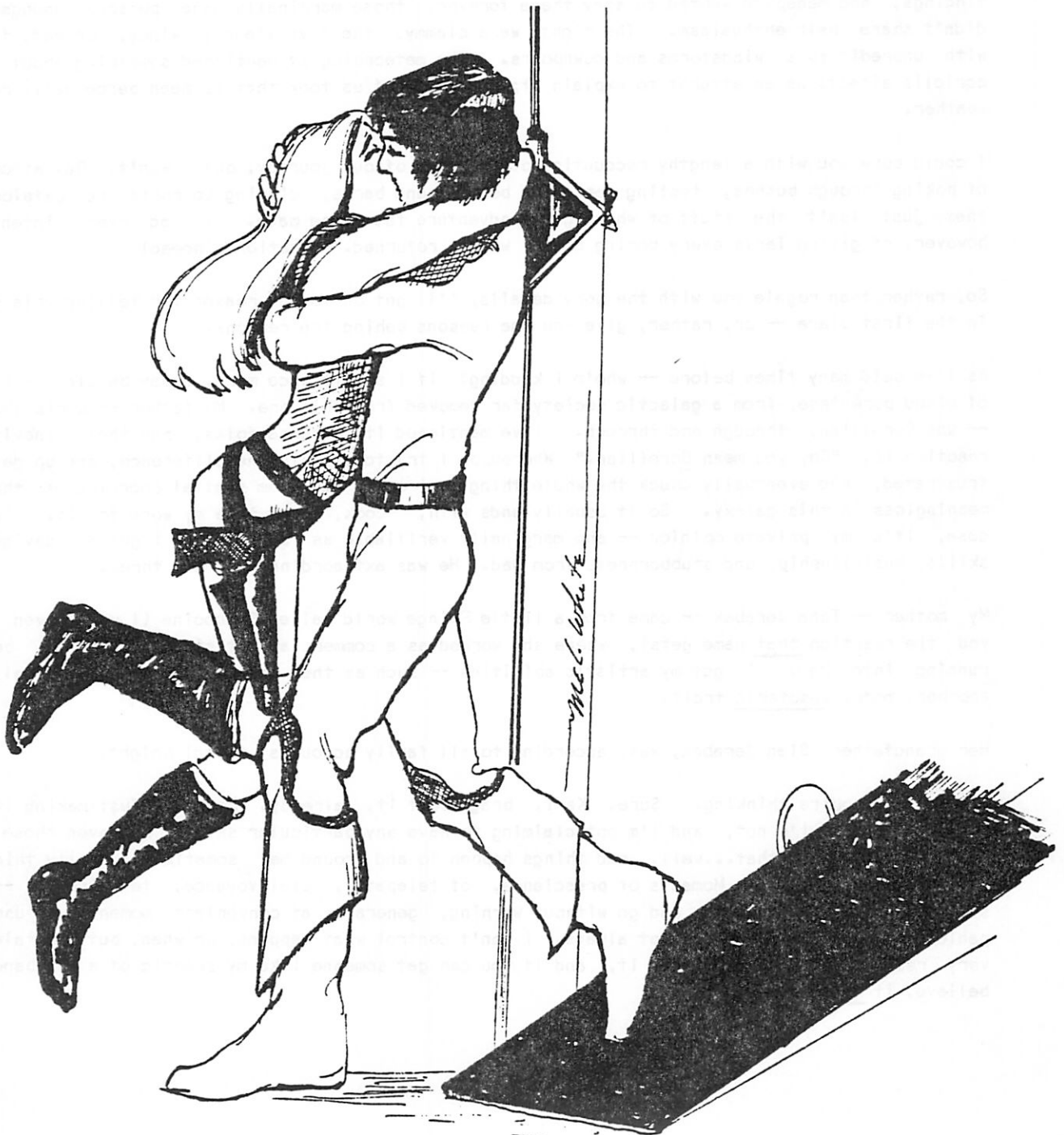
I never learned that lesson very well.

And if I thought the kids were bad, the civilian specialists turned out to be worse.

Taygeta, the zoologist, was a snob, pure and simple. The only person she ever deigned to talk with was the biochemist, Kalidasa. Now, she was nice enough — except for her annoying tendency to be incredibly unappreciative. Nothing was ever good enough or comfortable enough or anything enough for her.

Galus, the meteorologist, was okay personality-wise, but he was absolutely loopy about weather. He was so wrapped up in his studies of the planet's whacky meteorology, he didn't talk much to anyone; an occasional grunt was about it.

Ranjet, the botanist, was utterly impossible — scratch that, and change it to smarmy. He was interested in women for only one purpose. On our first night out, I was forced to give him a well-placed "nudge" to the solar plexus, which ended any possibility of social companionship with him.



And of them all, the Chief Pharmacologist, Menephthe, was the worst. He was crochety, cranky, and totally obnoxious. Two seconds after meeting him, I knew why Tanis hadn't wanted to come -- which reaffirmed my desire to get even. I didn't want to associate with Menephthe any more than was absolutely essential, so he, too, was right out as a source of diversion.

It was a pain, being virtually alone. With Morgan and Alexandra almost constantly involved with the cadets -- I'm surprised they didn't have to potty-train them, they were so green -- I was, for all intents and purposes, alone. And that planet was B-O-R-I-N-G.

The place had no name. Being as damply muggy as it was -- jungle and water all the way, sheer torture for my otherwise minor allergies -- one of the smart-mouthed cadets called it Sweatbox, which was as good a name as any, so it stuck. It was perfectly applicable. Sweatbox, according to Menephthe and Galus, was a treasure trove of medicinal bases and weather extremes, but for the rest of us, it was inhumane torture. Not to mention Dull City.

It was not only tedious -- it was damned uncomfortable to boot. Although Galus dithered at his findings, and Menephthe wanted to stay there forever, those marginally sane persons amongst us didn't share their enthusiasm. The nights were clammy, the days steamy, windy, or wet, filled with unpredictable windstorms and downpours. The meteorologist mentioned something about wild coriolis effects as an attempt to explain it; the rest of us took that to mean perpetually rotten weather.

I could bore you with a lengthy recounting of the days of our journey, but I won't. Day after day of poking through bushes, testing weeds and berries and barks, digging up roots and cataloguing them just isn't the stuff of which great adventure tales are made. I had every intention, however, of giving Tanis every boring detail when I returned. Vacation, indeed!

So, rather than regale you with the gory details, I'll get on to the reason for telling this story in the first place -- or, rather, give you the reasons behind the reasons.

As I've said many times before -- who'm I kidding? If I say it once more, I may be sick -- I come of mixed parentage, from a galactic society far removed from this one. My father -- Keris Jherrin -- was Corellian, through and through. I've mentioned it to these folks, and their inevitable reaction is, "Oh, you mean Borellian." Whereupon I try to explain the difference, end up getting frustrated, and eventually chuck the whole thing. I can't give 'em spatial coordinates; they're meaningless in this galaxy. So it usually ends with, "Look, just take my word for it." In any case, it's my private opinion -- and marginally verifiable as fact -- that I got my navigating skills, musicianship, and stubbornness from Dad. He was extraordinary at all three.

My mother -- Tana Jerabek -- came from a little Fringe world called Sharooline (I won't even tell you the reaction that name gets), where she worked as a commercial artist and teacher, before running into Dad. I got my artistic abilities -- such as they are -- from her, as well as another, more...esoteric trait.

Her grandfather, Sian Jerabek, was, according to all family accounts, a Jedi Knight.

I know what you're thinking. Sure, Karl, brag about it, already. Probably just making it up, anyhow. Well, I'm not, and I'm not claiming to have any particular skills, not even those of a novice. It's just that...well, odd things happen to and around me, sometimes, usually things I have no control over. Moments of prescience, of telepathy, clairvoyance, telekinesis -- the standard lot. They come and go without warning, generally at convenient moments -- usually panicked ones, at that -- but not always. I can't control what happens, or when, but the talent's very real. Even Alix believes it, and if you can get someone like my skeptic of a husband to believe, it must be true.

Hence, I've always been intrigued by Great-Grandfather's legacy -- I just wish he'd left me some of the control along with the potential. That's why, when I'd finally mastered enough of the local language to communicate decently, I sought out Morgan. I knew from that first instant in their landing bay that he had been the one to touch my mind. The thought of a trained telepath as a standard crew member thrilled me -- at last, a potential teacher! -- but it wasn't until then that I realized virtually no one else aboard the OSIRIS knew of his psionic skills.

His reaction to my knowledge was shocking; he acted as though his life were somehow threatened. He has no reason to fear; now that I know the truth of the situation, I'll keep his secret. It's just that it seems such a terrible waste. In my galaxy -- or in most of it, at any rate -- gifts such as Morgan's were held in awe, treasured, at least until that paranoid despot Palpatine came into power. That he feared exposure of the truth would make him pariah was a bitter shame to me. It deprived me of a possible teacher -- and the OSIRIS of a genuinely useful talent.

Lacking such guidance, therefore, I've been forced to go back to my old methods. Some days, especially when I'm B-O-R-E-D, which seems all-too-frequent around here -- I try meditating on it, to see if I can improve what little I can do. It doesn't work; I generally end up falling asleep instead. Of course, two days later, I'll sneeze and move a mountain, which goes to show you just how outstandingly adept a Force-user I'm not.

That's what happened on Sweatbox. One dreary afternoon, I was "meditating" so deeply, I wasn't even aware how long I'd been asleep until someone outside started hollering my name. I woke up, stuffy-headed and dragging, a sure sign my normally dormant allergies liked this place no more than I. "Who's there?" It was dark now, and the interior of my shelter was black as a Sith Lord's heart.

"Morgan," the voice came back. "Interested in supper?"

I fumbled around, looking for my camp-light. "Sure. Come on in."

The blond telepath entered with whatever had been prepared for the evening meal. It smelled reasonably edible. Only reasonably, mind you; that's something I miss most about home. Maybe some day, I'll get into their galley computers and re-program them for real cooking.

It also reminded me of how hungry I'd gotten. Hauling through the rain and woods all day can give one a huge appetite.

Morgan was grinning. "Alexandra tried calling you earlier, but you didn't answer. She thinks you're mad at her."

I shook my head, trying to clear my protesting sinuses. "No. I must've missed hearing her. I was...ah...communing with the Force."

He handed me the food, his grin fading. "What's the Force?"

That's a question I've heard a thousand times too many. I was tired of trying to explain it, especially since I wasn't all that sure myself. "The Force," I said flatly, quoting the old Jedi Training Manual, "is an energy field created by all living things. It surrounds us; it penetrates us; it binds the galaxy together."

I expected an immediate response of "felgercarb," but didn't get it. My stars, I thought, the man actually believes it!

"I don't believe it."

I sighed. So much for my assumption. And my intuitions. "Neither does most of my galaxy," I sympathized.

"Why do you?"

Now, that was a reasonable question. No one'd ever asked that one before. I nibbled a bit on my meal, then shrugged. "I know it's real. You should, too."

His eyes opened wide. "Me? Why me? I'm not even from your galaxy."

"No, but you use it."

His expression turned doubtful. "Oh, really? Funny, I've never noticed it."

It was my turn to be mischievous. "Oh? Then what do you call what you do when you're doing your psionic thing?"

He blinked, and swallowed uneasily. I don't think he'd ever quite gotten used to the fact I knew of his talents without being expressly told. "That's just psionics," he defended. "It doesn't use... There's no energy..."

"Really?" I was bland. "Then all that power comes from you, and you alone, huh?"

"Well..."

"Bantha droppings. If that were so, there'd be a lot more psis running around here, and you wouldn't be scared out of your boots that someone'll find you out. The Force is everywhere and in everything -- but not everyone can learn how to tap into it."

He snorted. "Then if it's such an almighty energy field, and I'm using it, how come I tire out? It seems to me it'd provide the user with unlimited power."

I shrugged again. "I don't know -- but it's the same in my galaxy. The Jedi weren't omnipotent. They were only mortal, after all."

"The what-I?"

"The Jedi. Trained Force-users. They were very influential, in their day."

"Were?" he repeated quizzically. "Not 'are'?"

I was uncomfortable. "They don't exist any more," I explained without enthusiasm. "'Absolute power corrupts absolutely.' Humans have that problem."

He opened his mouth to ask another question, but I forestalled him. "I don't want to talk about it any more." I really didn't. Discussing Palpatine and his scummy second, Vader, in any but a deprecating manner made me nauseous. I hauled out my guitar -- I go virtually nowhere without it -- to end the discussion. Morgan took the hint, and that was that, at least for the time being.

Sweatbox was a truly annoying planet, the kind that grows on you -- like a wart. Half of us were bothered by the heat, the others by the high humidity, the atmospheric pressure, or the incessant insect life. Coming from a culture that spends so much of its time in controlled environments,

I'd never bothered to have my allergies properly dealt with; there'd been no need. After two hours on Sweatbox, I was beginning to wish I'd taken the time. I was plagued by all four.

No one was in a good mood -- with the exception of Galus, who was having a weatherman's field day with the rampaging, unpredictable storms on this planet. It may have been a joy for him, but those rising and falling winds and barometric pressures gave me a perpetual headache. I was thinking of a dozen innovative tortures I intended to subject Tanis to when we returned; from watching the others, I got the feeling they were all thinking similar thoughts about their superiors. It was the only bright spot in the day.

Five days after our arrival, we set up camp on a thoroughly miserable evening in a thoroughly miserable jungle clearing. Morgan, Alexandra, and I had settled around the central camp-light, of an unintentionally like mind to find a way of lightening the oppressive twilight. Morgan poked at his half-eaten dinner, Alexandra paced, and I sneezed. Something on this world didn't get along with my allergies.

We were alone. The cadets were policing the perimeter, making sure we hadn't overlooked any potential dangers; the civilians were secreted in their shelters, and Galus was off to set up his scanners on a high-hill vantage point about half a klick south. There was a heavy smell in the air, the kind of scent that precedes a storm. We stayed close to the light, eating and talking and sneezing, but none very much. Something was afoot, waiting, something the three of us could sense, but could find no words to express. Alexandra was the first to try.

"I've felt better, waiting for a battle to start," she said, looking out into the darkness beyond the light's circle. "Either of you think we're in for a storm?"

I didn't really want to discuss the eerie sensations I was receiving -- it felt like a swarm of tiny mites was crawling up my spine -- so I tried to be flippant. "Yeah, as soon as we get back to the OSIRIS. I'm going to rip that miserable k'shass'me in Sentiology limb from limb." I sneezed.

Alexandra chuckled a bit; Morgan didn't. "Tricked you into coming, huh?" she asked. "I'm not surprised. He's...stubborn."

"Try 'pertinacious.'"

"Huh?"

"Obstinate. Very."

She laughed. "No worse than some others..."

"Commander Christopher, for instance?"

Everyone on the OSIRIS knew of my opinion concerning Christopher, especially since the fiasco surrounding my first solo flight, and his insistence we move on rather than look for Alix. I was madder with him than with anyone else in this galaxy, including that thick-skulled gundark in Sentiology.

Alexandra was a basically loyal sort -- despite her occasional moments of mischief -- so she looked a touch ill-at-ease with my strong condemnation of her Commander. I attempted to assuage her by going into my story-teller mode.

"Actually," I said casually, changing the present specific topic, "I've heard of people who were



more stubborn than both of 'em put together. My Uncle Marten's a physical therapist and medic at a kovrite mine on Rastine, and he told me about some of his patients who'd make either of those two look cooperative." Inspiration struck. "In fact, he had this one who..."

Someone in the outer camp suddenly started hollering at someone else -- Taygeta was screaming at Kalidasa for borrowing something without asking -- and the story I'd been struck by fled my brain. But again, for some inexplicable reason, I was left with thoughts concerning peculiar links between our galaxies, and a tri-syllabic name I couldn't keep hold of for more than a brief instant.

I was getting damned fed up with this sporadic memory of mine, let me tell you. The strangest things were setting off that deja vu lately, and I was becoming highly annoyed with it. What in the name of the Maker did my mother's brother have to do with anything concerning a scruffy sentilogist, anyhow?

I was saved from the usual dizzying train of thought by the arrival of a blathering Galus. He'd gone off to monitor some distant lightning, as I've said, and was returning in a state of extreme agitation. He wasn't entirely witless, however; he went first to the level-headed Morgan, rather than to the ignorant Menephthe.

"Lieutenant," the man sputtered when he was able to speak, "we've got to move the camp -- now."

Galus's noisesome return hadn't gone completely unnoticed by the others; Ranjet and Menephthe managed to stir their carcasses into motion long enough to come around and listen. Apparently, Ranjet had struck out with the remaining females on the expedition, while the pharmacologist considered any news his business, since he fancied himself the leader of the party.

Morgan paid them no attention as they approached; he was his usual competent self. "Why?" Terribly deep question, that.

Galus was still panting, but he held out one of his smaller sensor units for Morgan to examine. "I was monitoring that storm line to the west," he explained between gasps for air, "doing all the usual tests. Pressure, wind, electrical activity..."

Menephthe sniffed obnoxiously. "If it's such important news, Galus, I wish you'd spare us these nonessential details..."

"They aren't nonessential!" He had as little use for Menephthe's attitudes as the rest of us. "I was observing wind velocities and air mass movements, and..."

"The point, Galus," Morgan prompted. "Why should we move the camp?"

The meteorologist indicated a set of readings on the sensor's screen. "There's an atmospheric bore -- a dense wall of fast-moving air -- moving directly toward us. I used my binoculars to see if I could catch sight of it, and it's flattening the jungle about ten kilometres southwest. It'll be here in less than five centons!"

Morgan studied the read-out carefully. Menephthe laughed. "Oh, come now, you're imagining things. We haven't had any exceptional trouble withstanding storms before this; why the doom-sayings? I'm sure we'll be able to weather a little windstorm..."

"Not just a windstorm!" Galus insisted. "The air currents on this planet are stronger than any we knew back in the Colonies. That bore will hit us like a tidal wall, and it'll flatten anything in its path -- us along with it."

The other civilians and cadets had heard Galus's shouting and had gathered at the edge of the light-circle to listen. A sombre stillness gripped them. Galus may have been a little eccentric, but he was no prankster. If he said trouble was coming, then it was coming -- and if anything, he tended to understate the gravity of such things.

I could see the dismay on all their faces, especially on those of the cadets. Most of them had lived in strictly controlled environments for years, some for as long as they could remember. Such a turn of events on their first land-side mission had to be terrifying -- faced with a potential killer storm, five days' walk from any vehicles, with no way to avoid the danger. The youngsters looked pleadingly to their senior officer -- and for once, the civilians did, too.

"Well, Morgan?" Menephthe said, breaking the ponderous stillness. "You and your Warriors insisted on coming to protect us. What do you intend to do about this?"

He sounded as though the whole situation was Morgan's fault -- and Morgan's sole responsibility. Alexandra was quick to come to his defence. "Now, wait just a moment! You can't expect him to just snap his fingers and get you all to safety. No one could've predicted this -- we've got to work together!"

"As far as I'm concerned," the pharmacologist drawled snidely, "it's your duty to see us through. I told Commander Christopher I didn't want a troop of green cadets slowing our progress or endangering us..."

"They have nothing to do with this!"

"...In fact, I have no use for any of you so-called 'Warriors'..."

Morgan eyed the man with plain disgust. "You know, Menephthe, you're even more hard-headed than Tanis. Would you rather we stopped defending the OSIRIS for you, too?"

Menephthe turned crimson. I would've cheered Morgan then, except a bout of renewed sneezing prevented it. The pharmacologist snarled. "Be that as it may, I still haven't heard any concrete plan of action..."

"Then I'll give you one," the telepath snapped, the crack in his voice instilling obedience, even in the k'shassen Menephthe. "First things first. You say we've got five centons, Galus?"

He shrugged. "Ten at most. It's moving very rapidly..."

"Then we'll have to move even faster. Alex, scout the area for anything resembling better shelter. Ranjet and Ferishtah, you help her. The rest of you, start securing the area. Those shelters'll never stand up to the storm; we'll have to collapse them. Move it!"

I agreed with Morgan completely, scared though I was. I detest violent weather, especially anything with rain in it. I worked fast, running mostly off an involuntary adrenal surge; my brain was in a tizzy, and my heart was pounding. I'd never anticipated such a turn of events, that I would come face to face with certain death before Alix and I were reunited. Such a possibility hadn't even occurred to me; the very thought of it gave me the shakes.

Morgan joined me to help collapse my shelter, since I wasn't terribly familiar with the Colonial gear. He looked about as calm as I wasn't, but I knew there was a lot going on inside of him. As in other times of crisis, I could feel such things via the Force. I looked him in the eye and whispered, "You could always start teleporting the civilians to safety, y'know. It might..."

He shook his head; despite the darkness, I could see it. "I could never get them all out in time, not before the storm hits, or my strength runs out." He paused. The sounds of the approaching storm were clear in our ears, now, sounding like shrill whistles of warning, moans of the Damned, and immense feet, crushing trees like mere twigs. The jungle growth overhead danced in its advent. "My powers aren't like your Force; there's no unlimited supply of it."

"But I told you there isn't..."

"Besides," he added, his voice falling to near inaudibility, "how can I choose who should go first? How do you decide who lives, and who dies?"

"True..."

"And it would destroy my cover for good. I'd have to leave the OSIRIS..."

I stared at him. From his tone, that almost sounded more important, though I was reasonably sure it wasn't. In my galaxy, prejudices against psis are rare, as almost a third of the known sapient species possess some sort of extrasensory ability, from simple telepathy to uncannily accurate prescience. Even we Corellians are gifted with a sixth sense, a sort of infallible inner compass. That Morgan knew for a fact that exposure of his talents would permanently ostracize him from his society made my blood boil. I kicked the last part of the shelter to the ground with all my might.

Just then, Alexandra and the others returned. From the look on her face, it wasn't with good news.

"Nothing," she announced darkly, shivering at the howling wind and ominous creaking of the trees. "We're in as good a spot as there's to be had."

Morgan, very sensibly, wasted no time in lamenting our misfortune. "All right, then, everyone get into the clearing and lie flat. Use whatever's available for protection. Hurry!"

Alex nodded her understanding and went immediately to spread the word. I looked at my guitar with a sad eye, knowing it was apt to die along with the rest of us when the storm hit. It was nothing like a properly-crafted instrument, certainly not as finely made as my avilyset back home. But there was a certain sentimental value I placed upon it -- Alix would've been amused by it -- but he'd never get a chance to see it, now. With no real protection, surrounded by thick trees that were likely to crush us when they were inevitably felled...if the force of the wind alone didn't kill us all first...

I was getting more anxious by the second. Morgan secured my shelter with the rest and glanced in the direction of the approaching storm, his eyes slitted against the wind and the stinging rain that was just beginning to fall. For a moment, I wondered if he was trying to call upon some hidden talent deep within himself, as he'd done some months before when a survey team he was on encountered a threatening base star they'd simply had to destroy...

And then, suddenly, I knew what he was thinking, just as clearly as if he'd spoken the words aloud. He was a superb telekineticist, a fantastic telepath, outstanding with those powers he possessed. Yet, though he could encourage an already-dying sun to take that final step into nova-oblivion, he couldn't do a thing to alter the course of the elements, not when he'd no idea what really caused them, drove them on their courses in the first place. The inevitable result of such a storm was destruction; for him to encourage that would simply destroy us the sooner. Reversing the course was beyond his skills, beyond the energy he possessed, and he was regretting it

deeply... There was that, and the basic fear which drove him to die rather than risk the certain loss of all he knew, and a guilt which would follow him to the grave...

I shivered, but not from the cold or the rain. It was all so grossly unfair, both the prejudice and the position that forced a man to decide the fates of others. The civilians and the cadets were huddled flat on the floor of the clearing, some crouching low behind the collapsed shelters, hoping they'd provide extra protection. Alexandra joined them, as did Morgan — but only after he'd grabbed my arm and dragged me along. I was feeling such a terrible sense of disorientation and unreality... Stars, it almost felt like a severe anxiety attack! I couldn't even feel the biting rain against my skin...

It was like a living hell, like watching Death's inexorable approach. The wind shrieked like the Damned, the trees moaned and swayed and fell like the Tormented, pitching dangerously, snapping, uprooted — and not even from the main brunt of the storm, only its forewake. One massive growth on the clearing's edge snapped and fell, neatly slicing a path through what had been the centre of our camp. At least one voice howled in agony — and I suddenly saw red.

I really don't know what happened then; all I can clearly recall is being seized by a horrible sneezing fit. I know how the old texts and treatises go — anger, fear, and aggression lead to the Dark Side. But about then, I didn't give a damn which Side helped us. I was afraid for my own life and the lives of those with me. And more, I was furious that circumstances and ridiculous customs prevented a basically good person from doing what little he could to help save even a few lives.

As I said, what little talent I have usually comes out most strongly when there's a crisis. I can't choose or control what happens — but something always does.

I sneezed like I've never sneezed before. Morgan tells me I sat up — he thought to end the sneezing attack — and hollered something he didn't understand. Other than that, he's no more idea than I what actually occurred, but he knows for certain that, one moment, he was crouched in a protective posture, trying to get me to lie flat again...

...and in the next, he opened his eyes on complete, silent calm. The wind had died, the only water was that dripping off still-twitching branches, and the stars shone down pallidly from a clear zenith.



Someone peeked out into the sudden stillness. "Is it over?" a voice said in a timorous squeak.

"Akbar and Phidias are caught under the tree!" another voice cried. "Illyria, help me get them free — they're hurt!"

Apparently little more than shaken by the abrupt change of weather, the cadets — all two who were left — hurried to the fallen tree to help their injured comrades and administer first aid. Morgan and I got up a bit more leerily, as did Alexandra and the civilians. Gaius, in truth, was the only one to seem particularly animated by the unexpected happening.

"Fascinating! Never seen anything like it! It'll be one for the Journals, if the scanners are still recording properly...if they're still in one piece..."

He went off to check his instruments, babbling excitedly all the while. The other civilians collected in a small knot, clinging to each other for mutual support and comfort. Alexandra looked around curiously, uncertain, then went to assist the cadets. I felt like a beached fish, gasping and heaving from my just-now terminated sneezing fit. If this was "feeling the Force," I felt I could live quite nicely without feeling it again, thank you.

It took a moment or two before I realized what had happened. Frankly, I was astounded. I'd never done anything like it before. I'd never even heard of anything like it being done before. But then again, you know what they say about hysterical strength...

Morgan moved in the direction from which the storm would have struck, snatching a hand-lamp along the way. I followed, albeit unsteadily.

What we found made both of us stop breathing.

Less than ten metres from the edge of our camp, the forest was ruined, as if crushed flat by some immense rolling machine that had braked just in time to spare us from destruction. We started breathing again after a minute or two. The telepath looked at me quizzically, as if seeking an explanation.

I took a deep breath. "That," I said as calmly as I could, "is the Force," and promptly proceeded to faint.

When I woke up, Alexandra was sitting to one side of me with a flask of liquid, and Gaius was sitting on the other. Obviously, Morgan had told the others what little he could — incredible occurrences like this just couldn't go unexplained — as the meteorologist was chattering questions in my ear about this tremendous elemental power. I ignored him for the time being, as I was trying to hear Morgan and Menephthe, whose shouting had woke me up.

"...aren't nearly complete yet! There's more research to be done..."

"You told me your welfare was my responsibility — and I'm doing this for your protection. Gaius can't predict these storms, and it's already a five-day hike back to our landing area. We're not going on without proper protection, and that's final."

I closed my eyes and grinned. Morgan's cover was safe, and I was satisfied. I'd never been at any risk like he; these people already thought of me as strange, so now, I was merely a little stranger. And heading back was fine by me. Right then, I wanted only two things — to be back in the safety of nice, predictable space, and to kill Tanis.

I heard the civilians grumble and start preparing to depart in the morning. Gaius and Alexandra

went off with the others, so I was more or less alone. Only more or less -- I knew Morgan was there. I could hear him sit down beside me, and was familiar enough with his individual...aura, I suppose you'd call it. Maybe it was his scent...?

"So that's the Force," he said at last, with considerable awe.

I heard the tone of his voice, and moved quickly to uproot any mistaken preconceptions he might've been nurturing. "Don't expect miracles," I warned. "I don't even know what I did, much less how I did it. The Force can...control you sometimes, when it's Fated for certain things to happen. With me, it's most of the time. I'm only a catalyst."

I could hear him smile. "That's all right. It's more than I could've done. Thanks."

"For saving you? Trust me, I was only trying to save myself. Alix'd be terribly disappointed if I was dead when he showed up."

"For that...and for saving my...cover. I told the others, you know..."

"Yeah, I know, and it's okay." I chuckled faintly. "I've always gotten a kick out of freaking out the mundanes. But if I were you, I'd give up that cover, Morgan, and soon. The longer you wait, the more you risk an accidental slip. And you know how upset people can get when they find out you've been hiding something from them. It'll be even harder, if they're kept in the dark a long time."

There was a lengthy silence. "I'll consider it," he said at last, and, from his tone, I suspected he would. I grinned, and fell asleep. If the Jedi need stamina, I doubt I'll ever make it to the novice stage.

That's not the end of this story, however. (Tricked ya, didn't I?) We were on our way back to the OSIRIS, I in the rear of Morgan's ship, devising a particularly evil torture involving snakes, when the Viper's scanners started signalling the presence of an alien ship nearby. The Warriors took command instantly, going into battle formation, lest this be an enemy craft.

I cringed, knowing of Morgan's proclivity for saving others while he himself crashed. With four green cadets along, I figured the odds for our survival were pretty damn low, should combat be engaged. I tried to think life-preserving thoughts. I couldn't see the read-outs the pilots referred to, but I heard their discussion.

"It doesn't look like any Cylon ship I've ever seen," Alexandra pointed out via the com-link. "Maybe it's a straggler from the Colonies...?"

"We should have visual contact in two microns," Morgan said briskly. "Cross-check for a Colonial ID, and I'll scan for transmissions."

There was silence for a few moments before a crackly, staticky voice was heard. "...ta'ien fai tosaïn Corell'ïï VALONKHODER..."

For the second time in a week, I stopped breathing.

"Do you understand it, Morgan?" It was Alexandra, sounding a bit confused. "My linguatron doesn't seem to be working..."

"Same here. Cadet Lillyria..."



"Morgan, wait," I interrupted, leaning forward. The voice repeated itself, and was music to my ears.

"This is the Corellian free trader SHADOWSINGER..."

"Answer him!" I commanded instantly, not daring to believe what I heard.

Morgan didn't comply at once; a typically cautious Warrior, he was suspicious of a threat. I was getting frantic. I shook his shoulder as hard as I could. "Damn it all, Morgan, it's Alix!"

"Alexandra...?"

"Tsals kuteh'n zi tsals'cu akites shosh'n gaten! My husband, Alix! For the Maker's sake, answer him, before he thinks you're hostile and takes off again!"

Apparently, I was insistent enough to convince him, for the telepath finally complied. Perhaps he even used a little of that telepathy of his, although I didn't know for sure. Insofar as anything Forceful went, I was burnt out for a while.

I held my breath until I heard the reply. "Understood. Will hold position until you arrive."

I translated it for the Warriors -- well, maybe not for Morgan -- then leaned back and sighed. My chauffeur made an odd little noise; I could see his introspective expression in his reflection on the canopy. "Now, that's peculiar. He understands us well enough, but our linguatrons don't understand him. Any explanation for that, Kari?"

I grinned, watching the beat-up but familiar shape of that god-be-damned, beautifully Corellian starship come into sight. It was more splendid to me than the old Emperor's yacht, more impressive than Vader's EXECUTOR. "Sure," I answered glibly. "Your Colonies've been around for seven thousand years. My home-world alone has been around for nearly ten times that. We've had more time to sophisticate our devices, y'know. At least give us that much credit!"

He accepted that. I rode back the rest of the way in anxious silence, heart in my throat, praying I wasn't dreaming. I was the first out of the ship when we returned, and waited impatiently for the ground crew to guide Alix's ship in. I was almost afraid to watch, terrified this would be a mistake, after all -- until I saw a skinny but well-loved figure step down from the lowering entrance ramp. The face was drawn, tense, worried -- but only until we saw one another.

Watching him smile was more beautiful than the first dawn. "Kari!"

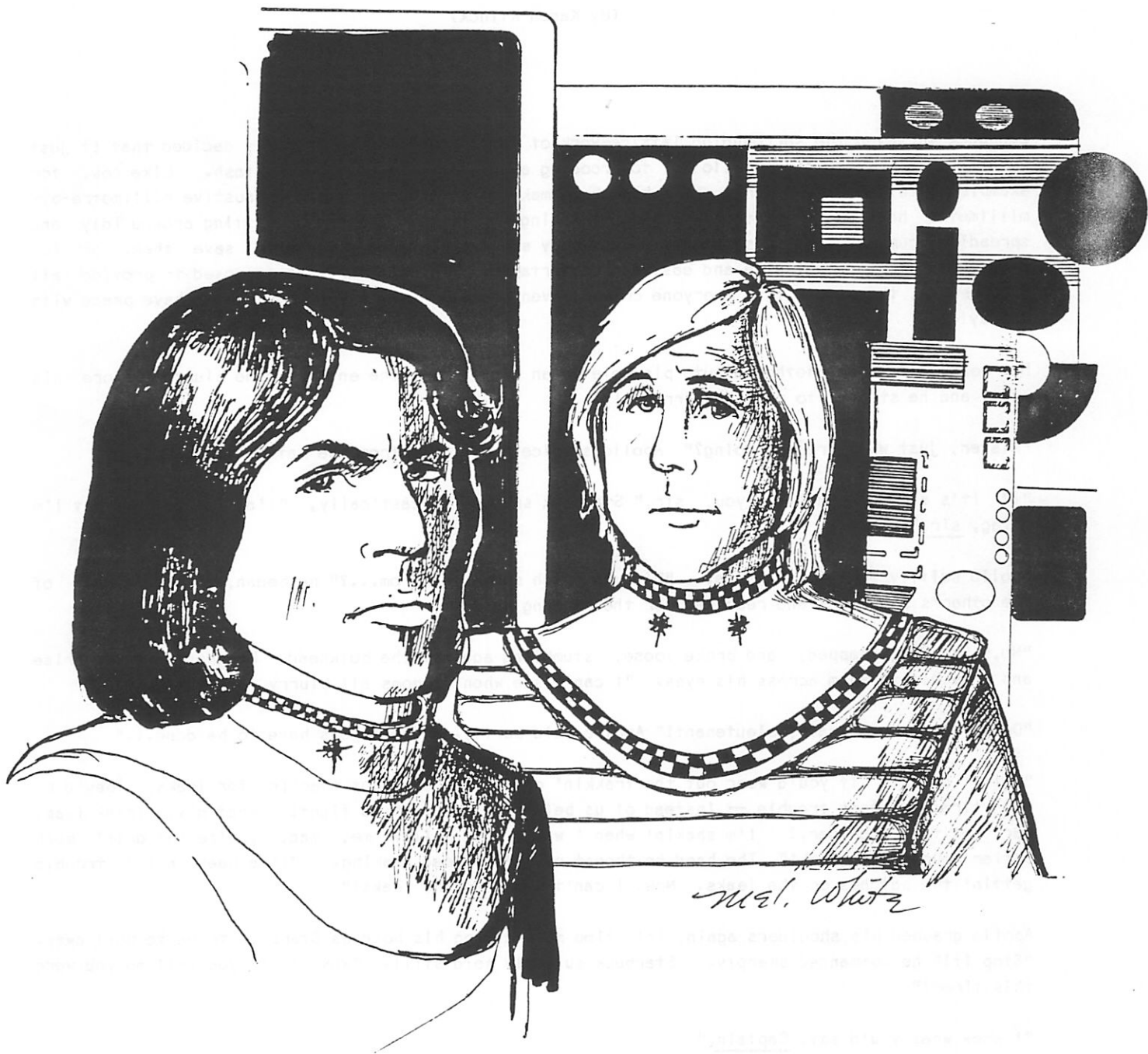
I don't think I've ever run anywhere so fast; I couldn't have, not even with the Demons of Death on my heels.

We spent a blissfully private day together before I started to explain to Alix everything that had happened in his absence.

The next day, we started laying plans to deal with Tanis. It was going to be tough, thanking him and killing him at the same time...



# Prince for a Day



by Karen Klinck

## "Prince for a Day"

(By Karen Klinck)

Starbuck surveyed the surrounding lattice-work of machinery, and resentfully decided that it just wasn't fair. Every time Apollo got to brooding about Zac, he got the backlash. Like now, for example. This old tub's crew could have been making the exhausting and exhaustive millimetre-by-millimetre hand search of the life support tubing for leaks, instead of sitting around idly and spreading rumours and discontent. Everybody still expected a miracle to save them, or for everything to turn out nice and easy and comfortable. The military was supposed to provide all the answers, the safety that everyone craved, even peace. As if anyone could ever have peace with the Cylons.

He wearily patched another minute pin-hole in an air-line. The entire scene blurred before his eyes, and he stopped to rub them irritably.

"Mister, just what are you doing?" Apollo's voice rang icily from the hatchway.

"If it's all the same with you, sir," Starbuck snapped sarcastically, "I'd like to see what I'm doing, sir."

Apollo swiftly went to his side. "Did you catch something from...?" he began, catching hold of the other's shoulders and reaching for the rubbing hands.

"No," Starbuck snapped, and broke loose, stumbling against the bulkhead. He grunted in surprise and drew his forearm across his eyes. "I can't see when it goes all blurry, sir."

"Don't be insubordinate, Lieutenant!" Apollo said curtly. "These jobs have to be done..."

"Well, dammit, if you'd wear out the frakkin' crews of these tubs checkin' for leaks, they'd be too tired to start trouble — instead of us bein' too worn out to fight! What d'you think I am, part of this machinery? I'm shakin' when I walk, and believe me, man, you're not doin' much better yourself! Look!" The hand he thrust out was indeed shaking. "I've been havin' trouble gettin' the patches on the leaks. Now, I can't even see the leaks!"

Apollo grabbed his shoulders again, this time maintaining his hold as Starbuck tried to pull away. "Stop it!" he commanded sharply. Starbuck sullenly held still. "Why didn't you tell me you were this tired?"

"I knew what you'd say, Captain."

"Well," Apollo shied away from the anger in the other man's voice, "do you think you can make it back to the GALACTICA, or do you want to bed down here?"

"I'd rather go back to the GALACTICA," Starbuck said instantly. "This crew's already grumbling about how us pilots are getting the best of everything. I'd hate to inconvenience them by finding someplace to sleep on their 'overcrowded' ship."

Apollo firmly guided him back to the landing bay and his Viper. "I'm glad we brought these," he remarked, trying to ease the tension he could still feel in Starbuck. "Otherwise, you'd have to wait for a free shuttle."

Starbuck nodded. He clambered into the seat of his fighter without his usual bounce, mechanically went through clearance, and blasted off. His target was making a wide sweep on the far perimeter of their rag-tag Fleet, and he made a wide curve to intercept her. He called in, and, predictably enough, got Athena.

"Hello, GALACTICA. One Viper on an intercept course for about twenty centars of sleep."

"How long have you been going, Starbuck?"

"I'm not sure any more, Athena. About the only thing I am sure of is that, no matter what, I won't get enough sleep. Ah, well, I'm not in any hurry; I'll be lazing at the far end of your swing. You might have to wake me up, though."

There was a hint of laughter in Athena's voice as she replied, "Okay, hotshot. I won't let you oversleep. Don't get lost."

"Yes, mother," he said meekly, and grinned at the low growl that echoed over the com before contact was broken. He wished he had a cigar, sighed, and admired the panorama of stars around him, revelling in the solitude.

There was precious little of that aboard any survivor ship. His thoughts drifted a little, and he sighed again, flexing his hand on the responsive controls. He'd sleep as long as they'd let him, anyway.

Microns away, shielded by the mass of a planet, two Cylon attack ships reported back to their base, to their leader. "Commander-our-scanners-show-a-lone-human-ship-of-the-type-known-as-Viper. What-are-your-orders?"

The Cylon receiving that message pondered it for a full centon. "A ship of that class cannot go long without refueling. There must be a refueling station or a base nearby, or that accursed battlestar GALACTICA. Capture the pilot of that vessel. I want him alive." Perhaps, he added silently to himself, the pilot would be Captain Apollo, and he would have the satisfaction of torturing the life from him. All any Cylon knew of the GALACTICA's strike-force leader was his brilliance in that capacity. To remove such capability was a Cylon goal.

Starbuck's sensors screamed information at him microns before the explosions bracketed his Viper. He yelped, "Frak!" and hit his retros. Frantically, he tried to punch a message through the sudden electronic interference, then a cold thought hit him. From the way the Cylons had jumped him, he was obviously outside the camouflage curtain that shielded the Fleet -- but the rest of the flotilla wasn't. He couldn't lead those Raiders back to the GALACTICA for fear that one might get away and tell the other Cylons where the surviving humans were hiding!

Aboard the battlestar, the communications officer cried out, "There's some sort of interference jamming our signals, Commander!"

Adama whirled and barked, "What?"

Athena turned to him. "Father, Starbuck's Viper is out there!"

"Red alert!" Adama snapped, still calm. "Battle stations! Launch interceptors!"

Aboard the damaged EVENING STAR, Apollo and Boomer got the news and raced for their Vipers. They were closer to the battle point than the GALACTICA, so they arrived at the scene of carnage first, in time to witness its end. Starbuck had already wiped out two of the enemy, as evidenced by the debris floating nearby. But even as the two Warriors put thumbs to retro controls, a Cylon blast exploded squarely on their friend's listing craft, and it disappeared in a blinding flash.

Apollo felt a cold leaden weight form in his stomach as the Cylon craft retreated and Adama called off the attack. Another one, he thought miserably. First Zac, and now Starbuck. Why hadn't he insisted that Starbuck sleep over on the EVENING STAR, or take the shuttle back, leaving his Viper for a time when his mind was clearer? Why had he conscripted Starbuck for maintenance duty in the first place?

He and Boomer accelerated fiercely, intending to avenge their friend, but the Cylon saucer-craft were retreating at full speed, and Adama called them back.

Athena sat numbly at her console, staring at the blank screen. She felt a touch on her shoulder, and turned to see her father's understanding eyes.

"Call your relief," he said softly.

Athena nodded, unable to speak, then resolutely took a deep breath and keyed the appropriate switch. In a steady voice, she called her relief. Then she went to her cabin and cried.

Apollo reported to the Commander's quarters as soon as he landed. He had a quick interview with Adama, which left both of them unsatisfied. The only conclusion they could reach was that Starbuck had somehow strayed outside the camouflage curtain, and the Cylons' scanners had picked him up. The imperative thing now was to move the Fleet before the Raiders reported their position to a base star or planet-based garrison.

Then Adama suggested that Apollo visit his sister in her quarters, since he felt she needed company. Mystified, Apollo agreed.

Athena lifted her tear-streaked face to him as he entered. "D-did you...s-see? You...were out th-there when it..."

"Yeah, I was. I didn't know he meant that much to you."

Athena put her hands over her eyes. "Neither did I. I mean, I thought I'd get over him. After all, he was always just another pretty face, right?" She tried to smile, but tears rolled down her cheeks again.

"What I still don't understand," Apollo snarled in sudden frustration, "is why he didn't get back to the GALACTICA in time!"

"One," Athena said so coldly that he stared at her in shock, "there was no hurry. He reached a rendezvous point while we were doing a check-sweep. Two, he wouldn't bring those Cylons down on the Fleet. What if some had gotten past the GALACTICA? Do you think you're the only one who can be a hero?"

"He never struck me as being much on anything but gambling," Apollo retorted, stung, forgetting much in his pique.

"You forgot womanizing, too," Athena said calmly. "Yes, and he was a better pilot than even you,

my dear brother -- the best in the entire Fleet! And he had a good mind for military matters. But he didn't have to live up to the image of Commander Adama, so he could have fun."

Apollo winced. Unbidden, an image sprang to his mind -- Zac's puppy-like eagerness to go on patrol, and Starbuck's kindness. "Feigercarb!" he snarled in a moment of rare profanity, and stomped out.

In the silence of his own quarters, he examined his emotions closely. Memories flooded in -- Starbuck teaching Zac card tricks, and purposefully losing to the younger man so Zac could get a cherished girl a gift -- although Zac never found out. And more lately, Starbuck playing the fool to ease nerves and bring smiles. And Starbuck, Apollo admitted honestly, taking the brunt of his own anger over losing Zac.

And then there was Starbuck as he had last seen him -- exhausted, irritable, nearly out on his feet. Apollo lowered his head in shame, feeling the tears come. It had been his fault. Starbuck had always been there to lash out at. It was all his fault.

\* \* \* \* \*

Adama looked at the Council of Twelve, weary to the bone, trying to gauge their feelings. He was mortally tired of their petty intrigues. "Our tylium situation is still poor," he pointed out. "However, there is a mining planet ahead. It was abandoned merely because it was too far away from the Colonies for present needs. The automatic machinery should still be operative. We would be able to supply our ships with little, if any, difficulty. I suggest we head there at all possible speed."

The Council agreed.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Cylons piloting one particular Raider occasionally glanced toward the back of their ship in triumph. Starbuck's unconscious body lay there, bound securely. His Viper had been bracketed by explosions that had destroyed his engines and stunned him. The other attack craft had swarmed in front of the on-coming rescue Vipers, while they had carefully transferred the human pilot to their ship and streaked for home. His friends would think him dead because his ship had been destroyed. The Cylon High Command would be able to extract their desired information at leisure.

\* \* \* \* \*

The first thing Starbuck remembered when he woke up was being in the middle of an ambush. He found himself automatically reaching for his Viper's controls, and stopped himself sheepishly. His embarrassed grin faded as he sat up, discovering that he'd been sleeping on a bare metal floor. A door with a mesh-covered window was the only way out of the empty room.

He scrambled awkwardly to his feet and stumbled to the door, trying to see out, then rubbed his stiff neck and swore softly. He knew he had to be a prisoner of the Cylons; there was no other explanation. He remembered the explosions that had taken out his engines. They had planned this. What he couldn't figure out was why they had kept him alive.

He knew they wanted human survivors. They were determined to wipe the rag-tag human Fleet from the skies -- every man, woman, and child. To pry information from him -- that was the only reason he could see for capturing him. His jaw set in determination. Going back to the far wall, he sat down to wait.



The Cylons came for him soon after. Starbuck glanced up at the pair of huge guards in their metal shells, shrugged, and resignedly fell into step between them. His skin crawled as one or the other casually jabbed its weapon into his back as they walked. He was taken to a large, darkened room where another Cylon sat on a throne-like chair.

"By-your-command," one of his guards intoned.

"Speak."

~~"This-human-is-from-the-battlestar-GALACTICA. The-insignia-is-plain. He-is-conscious-now-and-we-have-brought-him-to-you-as-you-commanded."~~

"So, human, you are a Viper pilot from the GALACTICA."

"I suppose so," Starbuck conceded, not seeing any way to lie convincingly.

"What is the military strength of the human fleet? How many Vipers can be activated in its defence?"

"Find out for yourself."

"The Cylons will be victorious."

Starbuck's next suggestion for the Cylons was anatomically impossible.

"Silence, human! Sooner or later, you will tell me what I wish to know. Your protein body will not withstand our methods of gathering information."

"Maybe you believe your own propaganda, but don't bother me with it."

"I will achieve victory over Adama and gain power for myself. I will destroy the effectiveness of the Viper forces by killing his accursed son. Ah, now it is clear. You are a Viper pilot. So is Adama's son. No one else could have been out alone. Therefore, you must be Apollo. And you would know where the humans are hiding."

There was a fountain of unholy glee bubbling inside Starbuck, which he was careful to hide from the bubble-headed Cylon with its flashing lights. This was a tremendous joke, both on the Cylons, who would be over-confident since they believed they had Apollo, and on Apollo, whose "thorn-in-the-side" had been mistaken for his virtuous self.

The brash Lieutenant hoped the Cylons would boast of this during the next skirmish. Considering that their most human trait was their vanity, he was pretty sure Adama would hear -- in detail -- of the death of his "son." Death didn't frighten him. His only regret would be not being able to tease Apollo about it. He kept from smiling by exercising a great deal of will-power.

"Would it do any good to deny it?" he inquired innocently.

"None, Apollo. We know of you from interrogation of other captured Warriors. I will broadcast a message into space, one that your father will receive. He will talk face to face with me -- and I will show him the death of his son. Centurions! Put the human on display for the civilians to see!"

"By-your-command." Starbuck's guards placed ungentle hands on him, and hauled him away.

He was taken to a large, open space, where a nylon thong was tied to each wrist. The free end of each thong was threaded through a ring on a pole and tied. This left his arms outstretched slightly above shoulder height. He was helpless.

He fidgeted uneasily, wondering what was in store. Soon, curiosity got the better of him, and he stared at the Cylons just as hard as they stared at him. He'd never realized there was anything but a warrior-class. It swiftly became obvious that, for the moment, display was all he would be.

Starbuck stood there wearily, center after center, awaiting the pleasure of the garrison commander. He even got to the point of looking eagerly at each new pair of warrior Cylons that came by, hoping they were coming to release him. It didn't matter that when they did, he would most likely be led to his death. His feet hurt, his shoulders ached fiercely, and his hands were leaden weights without feeling to them.

Suddenly, his chin lifted, and he stiffened, staring back insolently at the sinister, bubble-headed garrison commander as the Cylon approached.

"The GALACTICA has contacted us. Its Commander Adama has agreed to a discussion concerning his son."

"The Commander's probably never seen an animated Festival Tree flanked by walking garbage cans before," Starbuck said rudely. "I'll bet he's just curious."

"Your pestiferous human race has something you call a 'virtue' -- heroics."

"It gets your ass shot off," the man said honestly. "But sometimes, it's fun."

"You are known to your fellow Warriors for a willingness to sacrifice your life for others, Apollo." The Lieutenant barely concealed a start; he'd forgotten for the moment who he was supposed to be. "You might cry out to your father on the screen, beg him to sacrifice you rather than himself. While it would be a most interesting sight, I will not have it. The price for your life will be the surrender of the battlestar GALACTICA."

The man stared in amazement. "You've got to be out of your so-called mind! Why, the Commander'd never..."

"Gag him." The Cylon leader watched in satisfaction as a heavy gag was fastened in Starbuck's mouth. "I was correct. Not only would you have spoken, but now I am rid of your annoying noises." His captive blinked at him indignantly. "Bring him."

One metal guard held each thong, marching their prisoner helplessly between them. He could only pray that Adama would go along with the plot. If the garrison commander thought he was bargaining for Apollo's life with his father, he might betray some of his plans.

The cramped control room had been outfitted with a large metal lattice-work square. Starbuck, wondering why this wasn't all taking place in the much more spacious "throne room," was swiftly spread-eagled against the lattice, and bound tightly. He noticed that cameras were already in place, probably for the commander to keep an eye on his minions.

A metal ring was fastened around the man's neck, and a long spiral-threaded bolt was passed back through the lattice. One of his guards tightened a nut along the bolt, until he couldn't move his head. A few more hearty twists of the control nut, and the garrotte-band tightened unpleasantly. Another turn, and he choked a little. His other guard unsheathed the sword it wore and held it ready at Starbuck's side.



"You shall see," the command Cylon promised. "I will torture father and son together, side by side."

Starbuck reflectively flexed his numb fingers and cynically doubted that.

\* \* \* \* \*

The hastily-called session of the Council of Twelve was in full debate. As usual, the least sense held the floor by means of the loudest voice.

"I knew it!" Councilor Molin orated. "That young blackguard Apollo has made a deal with the Cylons! He and..." The colour left his face as Apollo's gun appeared in his hand as if by magic, pointing straight at him.

"Captain!" Adama bellowed, furious. "That's enough!"

Flushing, Apollo reholstered his weapon. Adama turned his steely eyes to the Council.

"There will be no more discussion. This is a military matter. If Sire Molin's accusations were not so serious, they would be ludicrous. Captain Apollo's record speaks for itself. I will accept two-way contact with the Cylons. You may monitor the conversation, but you may not take part in it."

"But you can trace a two-way screening, Commander," someone protested.

The smile on Adama's face was wolfish. "Indeed, two-ways can be traced. But consider this, Sires. This battlestar is moving constantly. It is difficult to trace a moving object, especially since we will just happen to be engaging in practice battle manoeuvres to train our Cadets at the same time. On the other hand, this Cylon is most likely to be found upon a planet's surface. We may be able to locate and destroy his base, which gives us more of a chance to escape. Now, if you will excuse me, I have a transmission to catch. Captain Apollo, have your squadron ready to man their Vipers."

Apollo headed for the Ready Room to inform his squadron of the upcoming mission. He felt a sharp pang as he saw Boomer sitting alone in a corner, staring at the floor.

The Captain went to him, laying a sympathetic hand on his shoulder. "You know, Boomer, I always wondered what sort of hold that maniac used to keep a nice steady guy like you as a wingman. You could have requested a wingmate change yahrens ago."

"Somebody had to take care of him," the other man protested with a wan smile. "He was a good friend. So what if he was wild? It was fun. I'm glad he got to do as much as he did. I miss him."

"Boomer..." He hesitated. "Boomer, will you fly wing for me?"

"Something coming up?"

Apollo filled him in. "Maybe Father will let us get a few in Starbuck's memory."

"Sounds good. Count me in." The black man shrugged. "I can put off a little chore for a bit longer."

"Little chore?" For a moment, Apollo was "Captain" again.

"Yeah." Boomer offered him a twisted, pain-filled grin. "They want me to clean out Starbuck's effects."

Apollo winced. "Do you want me to do it?"

"Wait 'til this is over. Maybe it won't hurt as much. Hades, maybe, by then, somebody'll be cleaning out mine!"

"Father's piping the show in here for all of us. I wonder what..." He broke off as the screen on the wall lit up. Everyone focussed on it.

"Commander Adama," the bubble-headed Cylon that appeared grated in a triumphant voice that sent shivers up and down the backs of the human listeners, "I wish to offer you a bargain -- the life of your son for the surrender of the battlestar you command."

"My son?" Adama repeated.

"Yes. I have your son Apollo as my helpless prisoner. You may be privileged to witness his death and know you could have prevented it. Behold!" A different camera angled in to catch Starbuck, who feebly wiggled the fingers of his right hand at it. Then he choked, as the guard behind him turned the nut again. Through his struggles for breath, the mute pleading in his eyes was evident.

"He's alive!" Boomer whooped. "Starbuck's alive! Yahooo!"

"Maybe not for long," Apollo grimly reminded him.

"Stop that!" Adama's voice rang out. "I won't bargain for a dead body."

"Bargain?" Apollo repeated incredulously. Then his face cleared, and he said softly, "Of course! Athena must be tracing the source of that transmission right now. Maybe, just maybe, if he can stall them long enough..."

"...we can rescue Starbuck!" Boomer finished excitedly.

"Or give him a fitting monument." Boomer stared at the Captain for a moment, then nodded slowly. He, too, became grim.

"As I said before, your son is my prisoner. He will die slowly unless you surrender the GALACTICA to me."

"I...I don't know what to say," Adama's voice stammered. "You ask...a great deal. I'll...have to think about this..."

"Stall! Stall!" Apollo gritted at the screen. Startled looks around him changed to comprehension, and the Viper pilots shifted in anticipation. "C'mon, Athena, what's keeping you? Why don't you have a line on them? He won't be able to stand that pressure much longer; they'll strangle him. I won't let him die in my place. C'mon!"

Meanwhile, Boomer was muttering, "Why, you frakkin' bastards! You unspeakable, frakkin' daggit-bait! I don't care who you think you are, you can't torture people like that. You..."

"Do not take too long, Commander Adama," the Cylon intoned. "For each time period that cor-

responds to ten of your centons, the nut will be tightened one revolution. Since a Viper pilot is a well-conditioned member of your species, I am certain Apollo will linger for many painful centons."

"What do you want me to do?" Adama asked simply.

"Bring your ship to the planet you have called Cofax. You will shuttle down to the surface to surrender to me. My centurions will take over the GALACTICA. Your Warriors will become prisoners of war."

"Very well. We will set course for Cofax." Adama's voice suddenly rang with steel. "But I repeat, I will not bargain for a dead body!"

The garrison commander gestured slightly, and the centurion behind Starbuck spun the nut loose. The Lieutenant's head dropped to his breast as the nut came off the bolt, and the watchers could see his chest heaving as precious air flowed into his lungs.

"But remember," the Cylon boomed, and the other centurion's sword slipped under the prisoner's neck, causing him to abruptly jerk his head back against the mesh, his eyes wide. "It works two ways. Fail me, and he will die a painful death by torture, which I will broadcast for you to watch."

The last thing they saw before the screen blanked out was the small trickle of blood on Starbuck's throat where the sword had nicked him, while his wary eyes watched the sword-bearer. The weapon's tip rested on his neck, near the wound. Then the transmission was cut.

Apollo slowly relaxed. "Well," he said conversationally, "it doesn't look like we'll have any immediate action. The Commander's manoeuvred them into a breathing spell."

"Breathing spell?" someone blurted. "After what he said? And we're heading...!"

"Talk is cheap," Boomer said sarcastically, fixing the nervous Ensign with a practiced eye. "We were going in that direction anyway. If it keeps Starbuck alive long enough to rescue him... One might say," he concluded with a wide grin, "that those Cylons were 'starbucked'!"

There was a loud burst of relieved laughter from the assembled pilots. Still, Apollo couldn't shake a feeling of guilt. He devoutly wished Starbuck had not decided to masquerade as himself. And he wondered how the brash Lieutenant had managed to pull off such an audacious deception. He said as much in a disgusted voice, and added, "We're going to have to rescue him alive. I want to know how he did it!"

The assemblage of pilots roared with laughter again.

"I think," Boomer observed, "that you've been 'starbucked,' too, Captain."

"Can't he ever do anything right?" the Captain in question groaned, forgetting for the moment, in his new irritation, all his guilt feelings about Starbuck. This drew still more merriment from his fellow pilots.

Apollo went back to the bridge to get orders for his squadron, and found the entire Council present, berating his father. Adama gave them short shrift. His son hung back, listening in appreciation.

"You can't give them the GALACTICA!" one old man shouted hysterically. "You'll leave us all with-



out protection!"

"Only the GALACTICA will be going in," Adama said, his attention on a monitor screen.

"As president of the Council, you should be..."

"...ashamed of yourself!" another broke in. Adama raised an eyebrow, not deigning to give any other indication that he had heard.

"We'll divest you of command! We'll lock you up! You can't allow any one man, not even your own son, to..."

"You seem to forget that my son has been on this ship since those transmissions started," Adama snapped, his patience wearing thin. He fought down his irritation and continued. "The Warrior in question is Lieutenant Starbuck — and we owe him a great deal, including rescue, if it is at all possible. If he had not posed as Captain Apollo, and goaded the Cylons into revealing their base, we would not have discovered it until too late. We would have moved directly into their fire patterns, and their attack would have been disastrous. How many of our ships would have escaped then, do you think?"

"This is still a military operation, Sires. If necessary, I will have you removed forcibly to your own ships, for I will not risk the Council. I would suggest that the rest of our Fleet head for Worlan and mine as much tyllium as can be done in four centars. Then, a rendezvous at Worlan's asteroid belt. You can hide very nicely in there, and the GALACTICA would be forced to move slowly, in such corridors as she could move at all. If you do not satisfy yourselves as to our identity when we arrive, scatter and reform somewhere else, known only to yourselves. I will not fix either that second rendezvous point or a recognition signal, since we do not know what persuasions the Cylons have at their disposal.

"The GALACTICA is going to be a very large decoy, while our Viper pilots destroy that installation and — hopefully — rescue Lieutenant Starbuck!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Starbuck sat on the floor of his cell, legs stretched out in front of him and hands quiet in his lap. His legs were asleep; he hadn't been allowed to change his position. His throat hurt, and he still wore the gag. The nylon thongs still chafed his wrists; the two Cylons standing over him held one each. The Cylon commander had decreed that nothing happen to his prisoner, and it would be so. However, the prisoner's comfort did not enter into consideration.

The Lieutenant alternated between elation and despair. The GALACTICA would move against this Cylon base, he was certain, and the thought made him happy. But here he was, a too-closely-guarded prisoner, tired, hurting, his mouth cotton-dry from the gag; and there were two Cylons ready to subdue him if he tried to move. His only prospect, other than death, was facing that lattice screen and more torture.

The outlook was not pleasant. Even if the Cylons postponed his execution, he would die when the human attack came. That, he didn't greatly mind, although his preferred death was in battle. But this way, too, he would take some of the enemy with him.

More time passed. Starbuck slipped into a light, fitful doze against the wall. He roused at the clumping sounds of a Cylon's feet entering the cell. This one, another centurion, announced, "The GALACTICA has come into scanner range. Our commander desires the prisoner's presence in the control room. Bring him."

Moving as one, the human's guards reached down and grabbed his arms, pulling him to his feet, then led him through the door. Light-headed from thirst and unsteady on his feet, he stood passively in the control room, incapable of resistance as they tied him to the lattice screen once more. Bound hand and foot, he could do nothing to prevent the nut being threaded on the bolt of his garrotte-band again.

A shiver passed through him. He felt he should do something, but exactly what, he didn't know. He felt he was putting on a poor show as a human and a Warrior in the presence of his enemies. And he was too drained to do anything at all.

He closed his eyes, leaning against the solidness of the lattice.

A new light flickering on his eyelids made him raise them. Commander Adama was giving him a very concerned look over the screen, and he sluggishly realized the Cylons had opened two-way communications again. The pressure on his neck suddenly increased cruelly, and he winced.

"What are you doing?" he heard Adama cry.

"Insurance," the bubble-headed commander said smoothly. "I want the GALACTICA. I mean to have it. You will shuttle down here, remaining in front of a screen at all times. You would not wish to miss Apollo's agonized death, I trust?"

Adama fumed silently. The Vipers should be almost in their attack positions by now. They needed only a little more time...

"We're not in shuttle range yet," he protested. "And our shuttles do not have visuals, only voice."

The Cylon leader turned to survey Starbuck, whose eyes were shut again. "If you delay once you are within shuttle range, the band around your son's throat will be tightened again. For now, it will stay where it is. He is already in pain, Adama. Bear that in mind."

Just then, a series of explosions sounded in a distant part of the Cylon fortress. The garrison commander turned from the screen and his prisoner to receive reports. No one yet knew exactly what was going on, and the Cylon glanced suspiciously at the screen. Adama was registering only what the humans called "concern," his attention riveted on the prisoner. Still, the old Warrior was a cunning adversary. He could have concocted some plan to turn defeat into victory.

Meanwhile, Apollo and Boomer had also been waiting for the start of the Vipers' attack run, feeling savage satisfaction at the memory of Caprica and the other planets of the Colonies, now to be avenged in a small way by a similar strafing run. They were hiding just outside the outpost, at a door marked as an entrance. It was of no concern that they, who had chosen to go in after Starbuck, would also run the risk of death in the attack. As the first explosions lit the sky, they started in.

The base commander turned in dismay when a communications panel exploded as a missile detonated close by. He had been tricked, outmanoeuvred by the accursed, unpredictable human pests. He had no doubt Adama had a hand in this, but the shorting of the communications panel had broken their contact. His flashing eye grid fastened on Starbuck, who hung in his bonds, only partially conscious.

"Prepare the escape ship," he ordered his minions.

One of Starbuck's guards left to do so. The other turned to his leader. "By-your-command."

"Speak."

"Shall-I-kill-the-human-now?"

The garrison commander studied his prisoner. "No," he decided. "It will be much more fitting to let the human Warriors do it for us."

"By-your-command."

The Cylon leader started out the door, followed by the impassive centurion. He stopped just outside it, however, and looked back one last time. Smoke drifted hazily around the room, and his prisoner was already choking on it, his face drawn with pain. The commander left, satisfied. Even if the Viper pilots failed to score a direct hit on his command post -- which he doubted -- the prisoner would die.

Another explosion shook the control room. It rocked the base of the lattice to which Starbuck was bound, and the whole device began to topple slowly forward. The man had enough consciousness left to feel horribly helpless as he fell toward the floor. He couldn't even turn his head to save his face from the impact. But as the mesh went down, one corner struck a console. The helpless Lieutenant felt a sharp pain in his right leg, then the mesh ended up on its side, leaning against the console.

Starbuck stubbornly fought off the encroaching unconsciousness that threatened to engulf him. He knew that if he surrendered to it, he would die. Then, suddenly, he heard familiar voices, and he smiled weakly around his gag.

Apollo and Boomer raced along the halls, heedless of the explosions. They fired their lasers at occasional Cylons and kept looking for their captive friend. Fortunately for them, the Cylons laid out their outposts very symmetrically, with all indications pointing in the direction of the command room.

They finally glanced through yet another doorway, to see the room they had seen on the screen in the GALACTICA's Ready Room. The lattice square they sought was on its side; they ran to it.

"He's choking, Boomer!" Apollo cried, peering under the mesh to look at their fellow Warrior. "Loosen that nut! Get it off! Hurry!"

Boomer twisted the piece of metal frantically, until it came free. Starbuck gratefully drew in deep lungfuls of the smoky air as the dreadful pressure on his windpipe eased, and he coughed around the gag. His friends hastily yet carefully turned the lattice frame over and tackled his bonds. Then he was being supported by Boomer while Apollo struggled with the garrotte-band and the gag. More explosions sounded around them.

"Let's get out of here!" Apollo grunted. He threw the garrotte-band against a wall.

"I'm with you, Captain," Boomer agreed worriedly.

"Leg..." Starbuck croaked in a weak whisper. "Think...it's...broken..." He was light-headed with pain and only half conscious.

Apollo ran a hand lightly over the indicated limb and swore. "It is. Boomer, you take one arm; I'll take the other. This place is going up fast. There's no time to make a stretcher."

They each draped one of Starbuck's arms over their shoulders, and lurched awkwardly for the entrance. A few metres outside the door, Starbuck's weak efforts to assist ceased, and his head dropped to his chest.

Apollo swore again, and Boomer echoed him. Somehow, they manhandled their injured friend into Apollo's shuttle and streaked for the GALACTICA; the battlestar was conducting mopping-up operations around the edges of the system. Boomer flew wing and cover for the Captain's less manoeuvrable craft.

Behind them, the Cylon Installation went up in flames.

\* \* \* \* \*

The GALACTICA had once again rejoined her Fleet when the medics allowed Starbuck to have visitors. Adama, Apollo, and Boomer made their way in, to find that the Lieutenant, by some machination known only to himself, had already managed to get Athena and Cassiopeia there. The two women had struck a truce until their quarry was fully recovered.

Adama just stood there, his grin getting broader and broader as he slowly shook his head at the carefree Warrior. Boomer raised his eyes piously to the ceiling, and dramatically lifted his arms in a combination of supplication, surrender, and prayer. Apollo surveyed the bed-ridden Lieutenant as if he'd caught him rewiring a Viper to give its occupant a hotseat.

Starbuck returned all this interest with an innocent look. The women caught each other's glances and chuckled softly.

"Wouldn't you know it," Boomer said in apparent disgust. "Captain, now I know why he did it. Just look at him!"

Starbuck's expression promptly changed to one of injured innocence.

Apollo's disgust matched Boomer's. "I think you're right," he agreed. "All right, Lieutenant," he growled, "I want an explanation for your outrageous conduct!"

Adama chuckled silently. Starbuck shifted restlessly on the bed and winced, and some of the good-natured merriment left the small cubicle. Cassiopeia firmly guided her patient's shoulders back to the bed, and Athena put a small pill in his mouth and silently held the glass of water where the man could reach the straw without straining.

"Well, Captain," Starbuck began easily, giving no thought to his recent pain, "I had a pretty passive role in the whole affair."

"Why?" Adama broke in. "Why did you pass yourself off as Apollo?"

"And how did you manage it?" the Captain asked curiously.

"Well, from what I overheard, my Viper got outside the camouflage field," Starbuck said, frowning into the distance. "They know our short-range craft as well as we know theirs, and knew I had to have a base somewhere near. All things considered, it had to be the GALACTICA. They set out to capture me alive. The original plan evidently was to torture any information about the GALACTICA and the Fleet out of me, then execute me as messily as possible, broadcasting my death to undermine the morale of any humans who might see it."

"Then their leader decided that, because I was a Viper pilot and out alone, I had to be Apollo, since about all they seem to know about him is that he's the GALACTICA's strike-force leader and a Viper pilot — and your son, Commander. He'd have the influence to get out alone. I just didn't deny it — not that it would have done me any good, anyway. And I figured it was even money they'd boast about the capture of 'Captain Apollo' and maybe give away some indication of their plans."

Respect showed in Adama's eyes. "Very astute, Lieutenant." Starbuck shrugged. "How's your leg?"

"Oh, it's fine, sir, healed with no problems. But the doctor won't let me up."

"And well he shouldn't!" Cassiopeia said firmly, glaring at her patient. Athena shot her a surprised look. "Commander, he was grumbling so much that I asked the doctor why Starbuck couldn't go back on duty. When the Cylons blasted his Viper to stun him, they did minor damage to his spinal cord. Since it took so long to get him under the healing ray, it's going to take some bed rest to complete the healing process."

Apollo was again assailed by guilt for letting Starbuck go out alone. To cover it, he glared fiercely at his prone friend and barked, "Don't ever let me catch you impersonating me again!"

"Oh, Lords! Who'd want to be you?"

Starbuck's reaction was so spontaneous and sincere that Athena burst out laughing. Adama chuckled at the look on his son's face, then sobered and stared hard at his young subordinate. "How do you feel?" he asked softly.

Starbuck understood the underlying question — what were his psychological reactions to his recent adventure? "I'm fine!" he protested.

Adama mock-glared at him. "I'm sure the doctor will tell me when you're fit for duty again," he said sternly, nodding to all present as he prepared to leave. "Good day, Lieutenant."

As he walked down the corridor, he had further reason to laugh, and laugh he did. For, floating clearly in the quiet air of Life Centre, came Starbuck's plainly disgusted comment on his current restrictions.

"Oh, feigercarb! Him, too!"



## TIY'S LOG

Colonel Lyra told me she wanted me to tell my life story to the computer. I don't understand why she told me to do this. I thought only Warriors were supposed to tell the computer their life stories. I'm not a Warrior. I'm not smart enough to be a Warrior. But I do know one thing. I don't argue with the Colonel. And I won't argue with the Colonel. If you want to argue with the Colonel, you can, but I won't.

My name is Tiy. I am twenty-five yahrens old. I was born on Leo. My father was a gardener. He liked to grow flowers, and his flowers were so beautiful. I really don't remember my mother very much. She died when the Cylons bombed our house. I was hurt when the wall of our house fell on me. After that, I didn't think as good. I had lots of trouble learning things in school.

When I was ten yahrens old, my father died. I went to live with Grandmother. She was famous. She made dresses for all the rich ladies of Thebes. Grandmother let me help her. She'd let me take out the basting threads sometimes. I could always find her scissors when she lost them. When Grandmother's eyes were tired, I would thread her needles for her.

The job I liked best was putting Grandmother's sewing case in order. I like it best when things are in order. Untangling the coloured threads took the longest, so I always saved that job until last. When I was finished straightening her sewing case, everything looked so nice. So neat. Grandmother always gave me a hug and a kiss when she saw what I did.

Siress Phila asked Grandmother to make her a special ball gown. There was supposed to be a big ball in Thebes after the Peace Treaty was signed with the Cylons. Grandmother took me with her to Siress Phila's house. The Siress used to tell me stories about when she was a Warrior and when she flew all kinds of fighters against the Cylons.

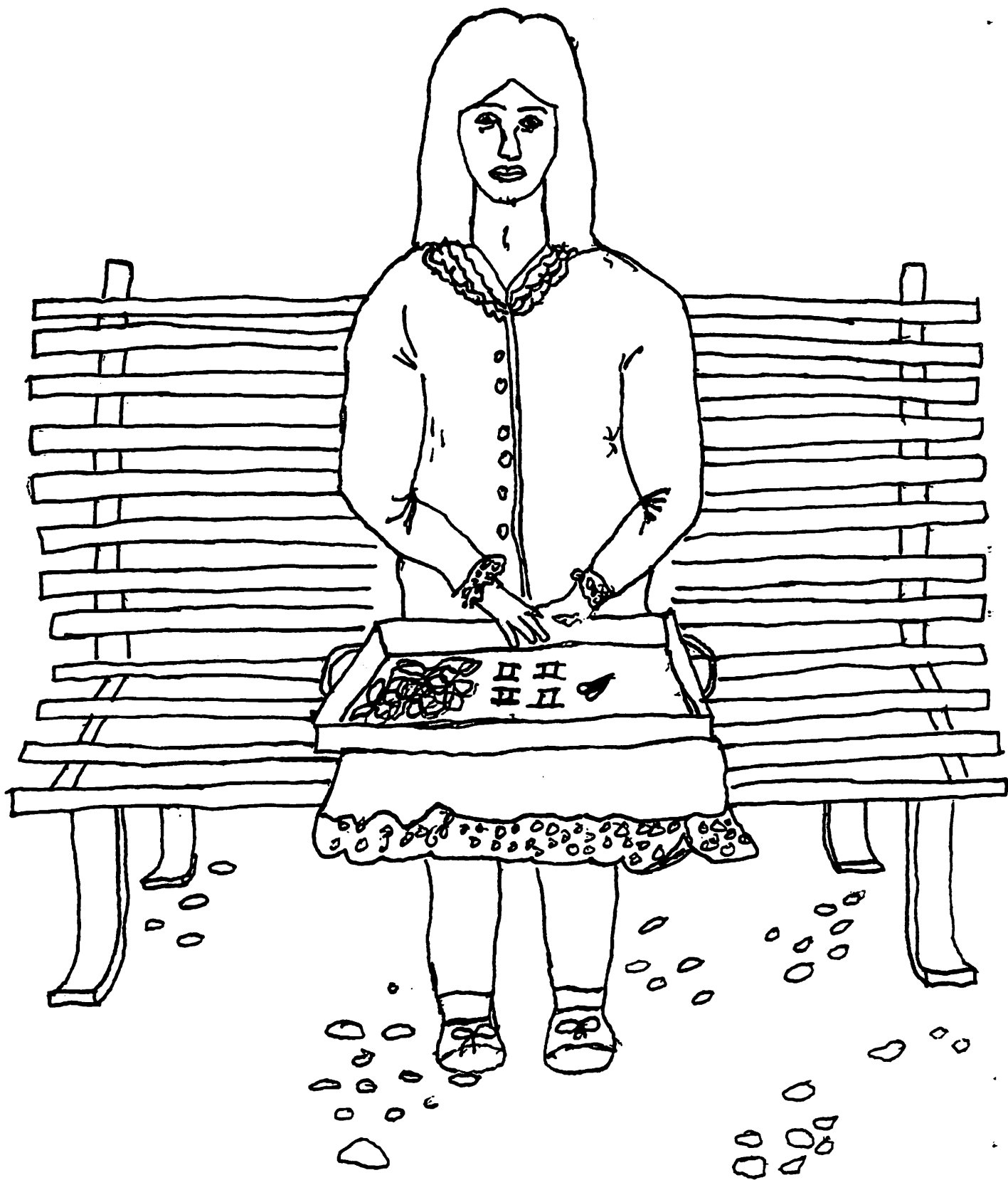
It was more fun to listen to Siress Phila's stories when Grandmother wasn't around. Grandmother didn't like me to hear stories about the Cylons. She said they gave me nightmares and made me remember when I was hurt. Siress Phila's stories never gave me nightmares, and I think they made Grandmother remember Mother was killed by the Cylons.

I was in the garden, Siress Phila's, straightening Grandmother's sewing case when the Cylons came. This time Grandmother was killed. She didn't die right away. She was badly hurt, but there was no doctor to help her. Siress Phila said she didn't think Grandmother would have lived anyway. But still, Grandmother could be alive right now if there had been a doctor.

Siress Phila said that we should stay together. She said she needed someone to help her fly the shuttle. She never told me where she found the shuttle, and I don't know why she needed me to help her fly it. The Siress was the one who was the Warrior, not me. She was the one who knew what buttons to push to take us out into space, not me. Besides, I cried most of the time after we left Leo and before we found the OSIRIS.

I was so busy crying that I didn't see how sick the Siress was. After we landed, Siress Phila was taken to Life Centre where she died. The doctor said her heart just stopped. I guess a person can die if there is a doctor around. And a person can die if there isn't a doctor around.

Siress Helen isn't a Warrior. She is an old lady who lives on the OSIRIS. She said I could stay with her. I may not be smart, but I'm not dumb. Siress Helen just wanted someone to order around, and she doesn't have any servants anymore. I really didn't want to say yes. I'd lived all my life with old people. I knew if I said yes, I would still live with old people. Because I





didn't have anyplace else to go, I said yes.

I'd do small things for Siress Helen. I listened to her talk and talk and talk. I'd help her dress and undress. I cleaned her cabin for her. I think she liked that the best.

Two sections ago, Siress Helen told me to take a note to Sergeant Galatea. She is Siress Helen's daughter. So I went to the Repair Section because the Sergeant was helping to fix some Vipers. When I found her, she was trying to untangle some wires from a broken piece of a Viper. She read the note, and then said some words that my Grandmother did not like me to hear. Sergeant Galatea got up and left the room.

I looked around the Repair Section. I saw several mechanics working on pieces of Vipers. It was sure noisy, with all the hammering and talk. I didn't want to go back to Siress Helen's cabin. I had just listened for the millionth time to her story about how she and Sergeant Galatea had escaped from Leo.

I looked at the tangle of wires on the table. They made me remember Grandmother. I wanted to cry again, but I didn't. I decided to help the Sergeant instead. She always talked to me when she came to visit her mother.

The wire was easier to untangle than Grandmother's coloured thread. It's bigger around and is easier to hold on to. I was almost finished when I looked up. There was a big man in a dirty uniform watching me. I was scared. He didn't say anything. He picked up the wire I had put on the table. Then he gave me another ball of wire. So I guessed it was all right for me to do what I was doing.

I was almost done straightening the second ball of wire when Sergeant Galatea came back. She gave me a hug and said she owed me a favour for doing her work.

Later Colonel Lyra came to talk to Siress Helen and me. Colonel Lyra asked me if I would like to work in the Repair Section. The Colonel said the broken Vipers were taken apart, and the parts were used in other Vipers and to make other Vipers. Since the Cylons have chased us from the Colonies, the OSIRIS has to re-use everything.

The Colonel said I could be a big help to them if I would work in the Repair Section. She said that Sergeant Jones told her I did a good job untangling the wires. Sergeant Jones was the man who scared me. In some ways, I didn't want to leave Siress Helen. She reminded me of Grandmother sometimes. But I don't want to stay with old people the rest of my life. So I said yes.

Now I have a bunk in the Women's Quarters with some of the other mechanics and techs. Grandmother's sewing case has a special place in my locker. I have a brown uniform to wear, just like a Warrior. I'm around people my own age, and now I have friends my own age. I know I will never be a real Warrior. I can't think that good or that fast. But I am helping the Warriors fight the Cylons when I help repair the Vipers. That makes me feel good.

I'm not so scared of Sergeant Jones anymore. He doesn't say much. He doesn't tell me I'm doing a good job, but he doesn't growl at me, either. He growls like a daggit when someone doesn't do a good job.

I have to stop now. Gally, she said I could call her that, invited me to go with her to the Officers' Club tonight. Sergeant Jones is going to play his pipes.



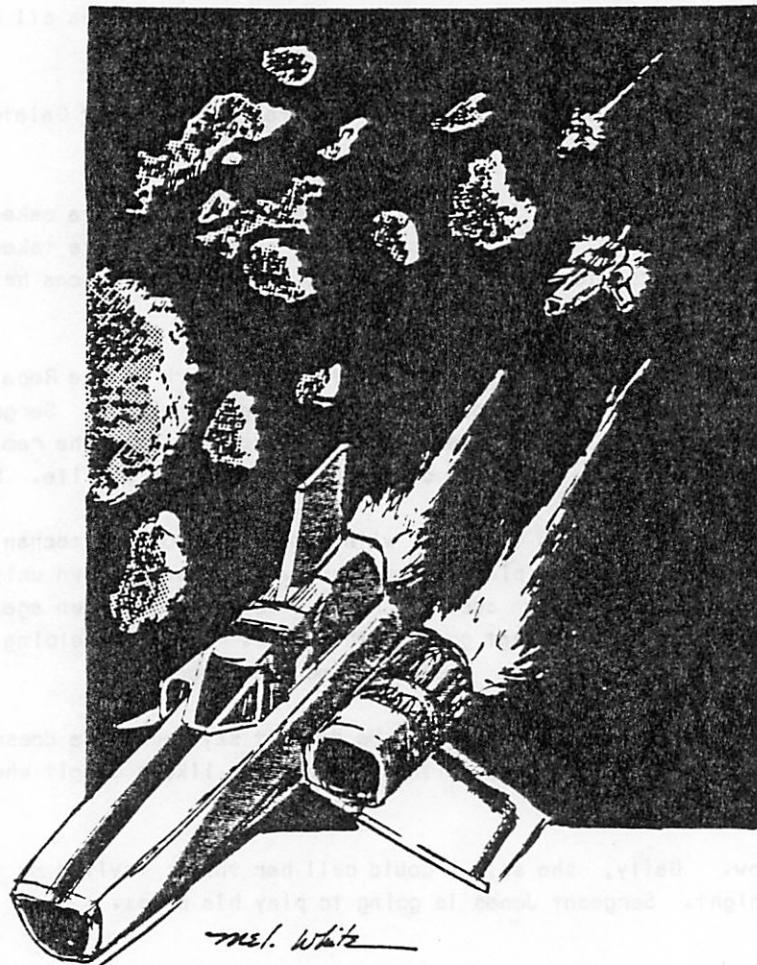
LETTER OF COMMENT!

Following is one of the only true "letters of comment" PURPLE AND ORANGE? has ever received. We want to share it with all our readers, and especially with Lee and Sharon...

From Judith Gaskins of Columbus, Indiana:

I just wanted to let you know that I really enjoyed THE BATTLE OF MOLUKAI. It didn't take long to read -- just one long evening. I couldn't get myself to do anything but read TBOM.

My compliments to the authors, Lee Gaul and Sharon Monroe. I thought the battle descriptions were very well done.



# "WHY DID IT HAVE TO BE ...?"

H. Ravenwood



## "Why Did It Have to Be...?"

(By H. Ravenwood)

When scanners aboard the OSIRIS indicated the remains of a once-thriving civilisation on a previously uncharted planet, Sentiologist 1/C Tanis and Captain Diana led a survey team down for an in-depth exploration. Within a matter of days, they encountered disasters ranging from brief disappearances to death, the theft of a tile of great significance, and a huge chamber filled with a myriad of rhythmically humming...snakes.

The red moons of Byzel -- the "World Where All Things Speak" -- moved into conjunction, an event greeted by a wild chorus of the survivors of the once-powerful races of the planet. Tanis, despite a late-night encounter with one of his worst fears, went back to work on the Map Room, with its sculpture of a huge guardian snake and its tiny model of the ruined city.

Lieutenant Morgan, a telepath, wandered out into the desert, drawn by a summons impossible to ignore. He appeared to Diana, though only briefly, to reassure her, then vanished again; she was convinced he must be dead, but nevertheless, took out a search party.

Sergeant Minerva, only possible witness to the theft of the all-important tile, was pushed over a cliff by a villainous sentiologist. Tanis calculated the site watched over by the Guardian of the Map Room. Diana and her small search party followed Morgan's trail to a huge and ancient amphitheatre, where his tracks -- and those of a vast serpent -- vanished between two pillars. The moons impossibly neared conjunction again. It was the night of the summer solstice...

Alone in the Map Room, Tanis was totally absorbed in his studies. Unblinking black reptilian eyes watched from a shadowed niche. Then the lights went out. Tanis froze, as a rasping sound echoed from somewhere in the darkness...

## Part IX

Tanis listened in horror as the rasping sound was repeated. In the utter darkness of the underground chamber, it was impossible to locate the direction of the sound.

Then there was a grunt, a muffled curse -- and sudden light flared in the passage, penetrating the Map Room, throwing Tanis's shadow onto the brooding walls. The sentiologist stared.

Doctor Lupus stood in the entranceway, an arc light in one hand; he rubbed his scraped elbow with

the other, and glared in anger at the sentinologist.

"Well, well, Tanis, fancy running into you out here at this late center," the medic drawled. "And after you promised to be a good boy, too."

Tanis released his breath in relief; he hadn't realized he'd been holding it. His shoulders sagged, and he nearly collapsed. The doctor was the last person or thing he'd thought to encounter in the unexpected black-out. "Hi, Lupus. What're you doing out here?" he asked shakily.

"Looking for you, of course. And I found you just in time, I'd say, from the looks of you."

Tanis shrugged off both the comment and his own trembling hands. "Did you notice the lights went out? Might be the generators..."

"No, I turned off this sector -- figured it was the only way to get you back to bed, where you belong." His voice was uncompromising.

As Tanis stepped slowly out of the shadows into the light of the curving passageway, he knew better than to argue; Lupus's forbidding expression was enough to tell him the doctor was in no mood for it. He also suspected that he was in no condition to win a war of words, so he gave in as gracefully as he could, following the medic back to the dispensary.

After a time, the rasping sound that had so disturbed Tanis was repeated -- and this time, no Colonial listener could have mistaken it for any human sound. The prolonged hiss of a blast answered the sound. Then the Map Room returned to dark silence.

\* \* \* \* \*

With so large a group of willing "volunteers," it didn't take Talos long to oversee the off-loading of the supply shuttle. Then a swift on-loading of materials Tanis wished to preserve from the Byzellian site, and the small craft was winging skyward again. The excavation team was at optimum size, with just over two hundred civilians and Warriors; any additional personnel would just get in the way, so no others would be landed unless circumstances changed or some serious problem came up.

With the shuttlecraft away, and the supplies safely stowed in locked shelters, the work party quickly vanished, both to avoid any call from Tanis, and to hide from the eerie yowling that still echoed from the hills around them, though the moons and other planets of the system were already moving out of their close formation. Talos found himself alone in the open.

Captain Talos was frightened by very few things. He elected to take a quick tour of the immediate guardposts before retiring for the night. The arc lights strung around the camp made it easy for him to pick his way across the uneven terrain of the Byzellian city.

Green Squadron's commander was by nature a night person, so his short walk lasted longer than he'd planned. He enjoyed the soft, dry breeze, and the cooler temperature of night -- although still quite warm -- was a welcome relief from the day's sweltering heat. Even the alien sounds of the planet were becoming familiar.

Before he was consciously aware of it, his feet took him, in a roundabout fashion, to the farthest corner of the site. He glanced up at the watch tower, where one of his pilots should be on duty. "Hello, Minerva!" he called. He prided himself on knowing what his people were up to. He also suspected that the young Sergeant had a crush on him, and treated her carefully.





A figure leaned over the edge of the platform, peering down at him, and he could hear someone else whispering. "Who is it?"

"This is your Captain speaking. Isn't Minerva up there?"

"Sorry, Captain," Hadar apologised. "We relieved her centars ago. She should be home and in bed by now. Just me and Dolon in this corner of the world. Anything important?"

Talos frowned. "I see... Did you inform her she was to check in with me when she returned to base, or has she managed to forget this on her own?"

Talos heard confused mutters before Hadar responded. "We told her, Captain. In fact, she mentioned that she had to check in before grabbing a late meal."

That was enlightening. He had been rather busy the last few centars, and it was possible the young woman, in searching for him, had simply decided food was more important than a few centons one way or the other. Now that he was out wandering around, she'd never find him. Well, hopefully, she had sense enough to check in with the night watch, anyway.

A distant, mechanized sound drew his attention. "What's that?" he called up to Sergeant Hadar, who had turned away to stare across the distant dunes.

"Landram!" Hadar called back. "Looks like Captain Diana's back!"

Talos waited impatiently, watching the vehicle's approaching head-lights as the transport bounced and jolted across the rough ground. The ram jerked to a halt at the base of the tower, and the small crew of occupants swarmed out. He recognized Diana immediately and crossed the ramp to join her.

Her set expression, and Morgan's continued absence, told him of her mission's failure. "No trace?"

She shook her head. "We followed him up to some huge stone monument, not natural, an artificial amphitheatre -- Tanis'll love it -- but we lost the trail. No idea where he might have gone from there, if he's still alive." She wasn't happy, and, for once, didn't hide it well.

"What do we tell Commander Christopher? We'll have to include Morgan's disappearance -- we can scarcely hide it from him, after all."

"I've no idea," she replied tautly. "Normal procedure, I guess. 'Missing' -- but at least we've got a grace period before listing him as 'presumed dead.' I won't give up on him until I've seen his dead body, or until the day we leave, if he hasn't returned by then." He can't be dead!

The man nodded, but wisely kept silent as they returned to the landram. It would be a quicker means of transportation back to base than foot power.

"Anything happen here?" Diana remembered to ask. Although Talos was her equal in rank, she was mission commander for the Byzel Expedition; he was only caretaker in her absence. She knew she ought to keep informed on what went on in her absence.

"The supply shuttle landed, and is already unloaded, much to our Tanis's chagrin -- seems he had some new site he wanted to start work on tonight, after dark. I believe friend Lupus has already interfered and squelched that little plan, which will no doubt put everybody's favourite sentiologist in a wonderful mood come morning -- which is in a very few centars, incidentally. Planning



on getting any sleep, Diana? You might want to sleep in -- we don't have to report to Christopher until almost mid-day..."

"No, I'll be up at my usual center," she insisted, shaking her head and dismissing the idea with a wave of one slim hand. "I've got a lot of people to worry about, and Tanis to keep in check, and I don't want any more 'incidents' with people wandering off. I may have to make staying put an order."

Her companion chuckled at her half-hearted attempt at humour. "If you say so. Care to take bets on how soon Tanis breaks orders to run out and investigate whatever it was you found in the desert?"

She smiled wearily. "You and Pandora can take care of the betting around here. Especially Pandora -- she's got the mind for it. Me? I just want some sleep."

Her weariness was intensified by growing depression. She was beginning to wonder if Byzel were worth either the time or the price. One man already dead, one missing, several serious injuries, numerous phobias surfacing everywhere, the recalcitrant Tanis to deal with, other personnel to pacify and/or bully into line... She sank into her own dismal thoughts.

When they reached the base camp, Talos quietly put her to bed. She slept alone, but no amount of company could have driven away the demons that haunted her nightmares. If Morgan played a prominent role in those dreams, so did visions of huge serpents with motives she couldn't understand.

But, in all her horrible dreams, why did her wingman not come to her aid?

\* \* \* \* \*

A tall, golden-haired man walked the midnight desert, his green eyes filled with wonder. No words were spoken; he learned in silence from the giant creature at his side.

How right they were, those long-forgotten ancients, when they called this place "the world where all things speak." Even dreams...

\* \* \* \* \*

"So Minerva didn't check in at all last night?" Captain Talos demanded wrathfully of the hapless Security man at the personnel post.

The hot, red, bloated sun of Byzel had already wilted Lieutenant Dymos, and what little composure he had left rapidly melted away into the sand. The Captain's outrage was not something to be taken lightly.

"No, sir," Dymos managed to reply. "Her name isn't anywhere on the roster. As she was out all afternoon, I just assumed she didn't know about the new procedure, or forgot, so I wasn't overly concerned when she failed to show up..."

"You weren't concerned?! Of all the imbecilic... You couldn't even do a simple bedcheck? No, of course not -- you'd've had to leave your post. If orders were always meant to be obeyed, the military would've been ruled and regulated out of existence yahrens ago," Talos fumed.

Sergeant Minerva's bunk was still made up, hadn't been slept in. No one had seen her last night or this morning. She had disappeared, in much the same manner -- Talos almost shuddered -- as Morgan, without a trace, at some susceptible time -- and had been unmissed for centars.

He saw Lieutenants Gregory and Gideon, passing near the command post, obviously on their way to the mess hall. They'll do, he thought. Gideon was a by-the-book Warrior. Gregory was much less military-minded, but was equally dependable, with less arrogance and more initiative. "Lieutenants!" he barked.

Both men came to attention in surprise, trading only the merest of sideways glances before responding rigidly to the Captain's call. "Yes, sir?" they inquired in unison.

"Have you had breakfast?"

"No, sir," Gideon replied, puzzled. Gregory merely stared.

"Good. It seems sweet little Sergeant Minerva failed to check in last night when she returned from Watchpoint Thirteen. Nor did she return to her bunk. She has not been seen in the mess hall or about the commons.

"You will accompany Kaitan and Ryan to Watchpoint Thirteen. Then, with Hadar and Dolon, you will comb every millimetre of her usual route back here. If nothing shows up, you will check every millimetre of every possible detour she may have made. Then report back to me. If you find nothing, I want to know it within the center. If you find anything -- such as footprints, bodies, blood, weapons, traces of a struggle or of some act of incredible stupidity on her part -- I want to know it even sooner. Understood?"

"Yes, sir!" they chorused.

"Go!"

Gideon had appeared merely concerned when he heard Minerva was missing -- a polite, expected reaction. Gregory had been shocked at first, then angry at the thought of violence to a fellow Warrior, especially a young and pretty one. Both men retreated rapidly at Talos's dismissal. He turned, to find himself face to face with Diana.

"I heard about Minerva," she said flatly, but he could see the war of rage and fear in her shadowed green eyes. She hadn't slept well. "I don't like it, Talos. I don't like seeing things like this happen to people I'm responsible for. I don't want them disappearing like this." Her voice rose slightly at the end of her words, as if the simple command, voiced for the planet to hear, would bring obedience.

With a deep breath, she brought herself back under control. "I don't want to have to set up a defence perimeter on a dead planet, against enemies we don't even know exist! Talos, what's happening on this planet?"

Her final cry was almost, but not quite, beseeching. Somehow, he suspected this was as near as she'd ever come to admitting the situation could ever pass beyond her ability to control. She'd never admit anything more. She'd probably not even believe it if he told her so; her pride would refuse it.

But she must be very shaken to talk like this at all. What could he say?

"I'm sure our eager Lieutenants will find something," he told her. "People don't just disappear without a trace." She looked skeptical. Wrong tack. "They're good men, they know their jobs. We'll find out what's happening here; and whatever it is, we'll deal with it. Let's find Tanis. We'll need his information for your report."

Diana controlled herself with an inner struggle, but with no visible outward strain. She nodded coolly. They had a job to do.

\* \* \* \* \*

Freya stared across the dreary, featureless landscape; the almost flat terrain was all that was left of several acres of city. A single stone chimney protruding from the sand-filled gorge was the only sign of the presence of the ruins.

"Oh, Lords," she groaned in real despair. "It'll take days just to make a dent in it. Why in Hades does he always have to pick the worst possible places in all creation for his great discoveries?"

The grey-and-white bast perched on her shoulder flicked his tail across her face as he meorowwed in feline sympathy. The language of the human male walking beside her was considerably more graphic on the question of what Tanis should do with his planet-sized sand pile.

Freya coughed to hide her involuntary laughter; she didn't want to give Menkar any encouragement. Her mirth died as they trudged over the sand-swirled ground with the rest of Tanis's excavation crew. In Byzel's arid climate, this would be a sweaty, grimy, miserable job.

In a few moments, they had reached Wilson, who was staring disconsolately at a scrap of paper in his hands as he leaned against the upthrust chimney's weathered stone. On the paper was Tanis's poorly drawn reproduction of his own survey platte of the few acres of ground on which they stood. The Sergeant was obviously having great difficulty deciphering the scrawling, scribbled script.

Freya glanced over his shoulder. "Would it help if I added an arrow and a 'you are here'?" she inquired with poisonous sweetness.

Wilson sighed, sparing her only the briefest of glances. "It might at that. I can't make any of this out!"

"Let me see," a calm voice interjected as a large tanned hand snatched the map from Wilson. Sept studied it briefly, raising his eyes occasionally to glance at the sandy landscape surrounding them. "Hmmm."

"You can't figure it out either, right?" Freya groaned. Tanis and Sept might be the best of friends, but surely not even friendship could make sense of the random squiggles and odd lines posing as a map.

"Of course, I can," Sept replied thoughtfully. Carefully aligning himself with the chimney and a compass, he took a dozen long steps directly to the east, then again studied both map and terrain, noting a gently sloping ridge, a small drift, other heaps of rubble jutting upward through the sand-filled plaza.

He pointed back at the chimney. "Begin digging there; clear away the sand around it for several metres. Then trace a trench due east. We'll dig down until we reach the dome indicated in the model in the Map Room. Then we'll gradually widen and deepen the trench, uncovering the entire structure. That'll take at least a day or two..."

He double-checked his mental calculations and his interpretation of the map, then nodded emphatically. "Yes, that's it. That's what Tanis wants done here. Now, I suggest we all get started, unless there are questions... Yes, Freya, what is it?"



Her indignation showed. "And just what is our lord and master going to be doing while we're stuck out here in the hot sun, digging ditches?" she demanded belligerently.

"Captain Diana's brought back news of some massive structure out in the desert, far beyond the limits of the city as we've defined them. Tanis has gone to investigate. He'll be back as soon as he can," Sept replied patiently. He'd worked with Freya before, and was capable of enduring even her tirades.

"What kind of structure?" one of the others inquired.

"I'm not really sure," the senior sentiologist answered, "but apparently, it's on a quite large scale, and in a rather inaccessible region. That alone piqued Tanis's curiosity, so he had to make at least a cursory examination of it before coming out here."

"Must be spectacular, for him to leave this," Freya muttered sarcastically, indicating the vast expanse of near-featureless sand. "Last night, we couldn't have dragged him away from this if we'd tried. Fortunately, in the light of day, he's more sane. He runs away -- and leaves us with the dirty work."

Sept tried to hide his amusement; one could always count on Freya to gripe the loudest -- and to work the hardest, too. "Right. So let's get to it. The sooner we start, the sooner we'll finish..." As he spoke, he energetically pulled off his shirt, shouldered a shovel, and selected a stiff-bristled dromen-hair brush. Tools of his trade in hand, he marched back to the chimney, dropped to his knees, and began to dig. Despite a few grumbles and some out-and-out complaints, in a few centons the rest of his crew was following his example.

It was fortunate for one of the younger techs that Freya didn't hear his whispered comment to a friend. "Too bad we can't harness the 'lady' warrior's mouth -- the wind power alone would make shovels obsolete!"

But she didn't hear him -- so he survived with his body intact.

\* \* \* \* \*

His chin itched. Tanis raised a hand to absently scratch the annoying, not-quite-healed wound. That smug medic was right, of course -- it was scarring. But that was immaterial to the sentiologist; he was in his element on this ancient, crumbling world.

His chosen task for the day was to investigate Captain Diana's find of the evening before, the vast amphitheatre in the desert. It meant leaving Sept to run the new excavation, nicknamed Srolt by several of the younger techs, for no reason Tanis could discern -- inside joke, probably. But he wasn't overly concerned. Sept was dependable, and one of his closest friends on the Byzel Expedition; he could handle Srolt -- and the youngsters.

Tanis glanced at his assembled work crew, who were eagerly loading the landram with equipment for the study of the massive, distant monument in the desert. He was taking Daphne rather than Ashur -- Captain Hannibal had commented on the unusual shadows that might be relief work on the tall stone pillars, and he wanted better copies of them than he could make himself -- he was a sentiologist, after all, not a damned artist! Besides, Daphne could draw, and Ashur was busy with the numerous hieroglyphics they'd found throughout the city.

Selina, of Planet Survey, was Tanis's concession to Khetl's suggestion that one of his people accompany the investigating party. The sentiologist wasn't particularly fond of the girl, but she

did know her planetology, and might be able to tell them something about the materials used in building the structure. Hylas's area of expertise was architecture, which should also come in handy. The only reason Tanis permitted Corporal Janus to accompany them was that he needed someone to drive the landram.

He looked away again. It was going to be another hot, dry, cloudless day. Galus, the meteorologist, and Tefnut, his assistant, concurred that the air fronts would remain stationary for at least the next day and a half -- more than enough time to check out the amphitheatre -- although the weather should change dramatically after that. Both weather experts were worried about some disturbance out to the west.

So was he, now. Another storm like the first one could wreck all their work, take days to clean up, and set them back at least a section.

Movement in the camp caught his eye. Diana, her flaming hair unmistakable, was striding purposefully in his direction, a number of personnel trailing along behind. He could sense her anger. What in Hades did the woman want this time?

"Hurry up," he growled at his work party, speaking under his breath so the sound wouldn't carry past the landram. As Diana came closer, he discarded his brief, forlorn hope that she was really going somewhere else.

She halted a dozen metres from the landram, and, arms crossed, studied every man and woman present. They watched uncomfortably, exchanging furtive glances. Then she turned to Tanis.

"Where are you going?" she demanded.

"We're checking out your amphitheatre, if it's really any of your business," he replied. "I seem to recall being placed in charge of the archaeological aspects of this expedition..."

"That was before people began disappearing."

"People...?" Plural? "Someone else is gone?"

She nodded curtly. "Sergeant Minerva, of Green Squadron."

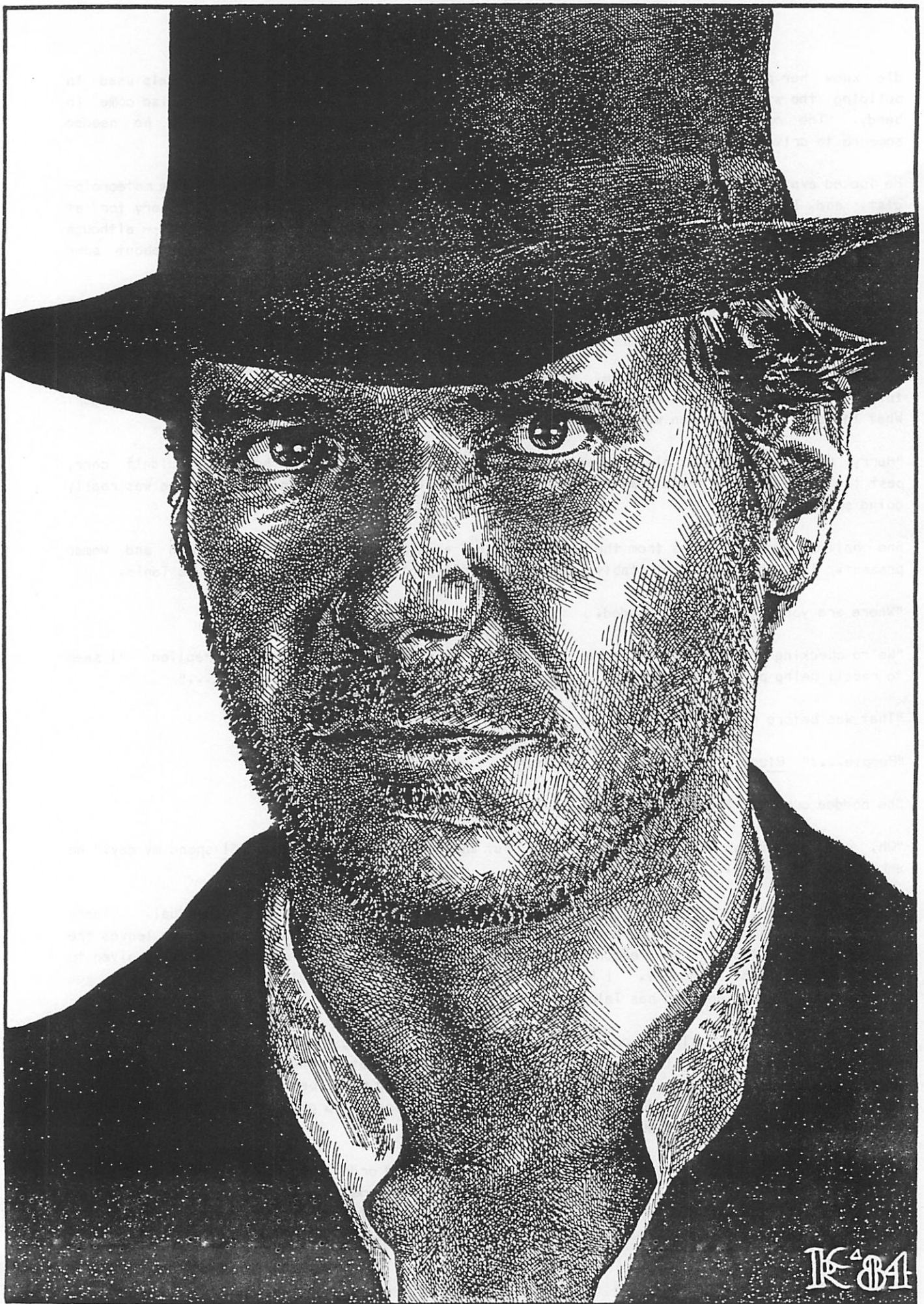
"Oh, one of yours. I'm sorry about that, but what's it got to do with how I spend my day?" he asked more patiently.

She frowned, as if her reasons should be obvious to even the most dim-witted individual. "There have been changes in security procedures. For the duration of this expedition, no one leaves the city perimeter without Warrior escort. No one works alone, and daily reports are to be given to either Captain Talos or myself. I have not been informed of your destination, or of how long you plan to be gone, and neither has Talos. You have insufficient escort..."

Tanis had tried to be patient; now, he interrupted, still making a valiant attempt to be reasonable. "Look, I'm sure I have enough personnel to insure that no one will work alone. It's daylight, for Sagan's sake, not the middle of the night, and we'll be in the open, where nothing can take us by surprise. I don't need a group of useless bodies to get in the way, standing over us like we were some sort of helpless..."

"You'll take an adequate escort, or you won't go at all," she ordered grimly. "If you continue to flaunt regulations, you'll be sent back to the OSIRIS, and someone else will be placed in charge down here. I'm not going to stand for any more of this behaviour from you or anyone else. Is





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that clear?"

His jaw twitched furiously, and he clenched his hands tightly in outrage. "I hear you, Captain! And I do hereby protest this continued intrusion in my work..."

"Protest acknowledged. Is my order clear?" she repeated, the green fire in her eyes daring him to give a negative response.

For a moment, Tanis feared he would lose control of his temper completely. "Clear!" he snapped. "If you must send an 'escort' with us, at least give me someone useful!" He would save his protests for Talos, and if that proved fruitless, for Commander Christopher himself. There was certainly no talking to this arrogant woman!

"Good." She gestured several Warriors forward. "As I see Corporal Janus is already with you, I am assigning Lieutenant Quetzal and Sergeants Skyler and Callisto to complete your party; they, at least, should have sense enough to check in at regular intervals. We expect you back before dark." She turned on her heel and stalked away.

Tanis growled something at her retreating back, then snarled at his hapless "escorts." "Don't just stand there like broken lumps of stone; get on board!" He strode toward the landram in outraged fury; his crew stepped aside for him, then boarded the small vehicle behind him.

"I'll man the laser on top," Quetzal quickly decided. "You two can ride inside." He clambered nimbly to the landram's roof.

"Thanks a heap!" Skyler glanced morosely at his fellow pilot. "You know, Callie, we are not going to like this job."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Not even footprints," Dolon grumbled, discouraged. They'd been searching for Minerva for over a centar, and had found no trace of her.

"Considering the wind, and the number of people constantly around the site, that's not too surprising," Gideon commented coolly. "Her path was probably obliterated some time ago." Minerva was barely an acquaintance, and he regarded her as of no importance to him or to his future. "We've traced the route between Watchpoint Thirteen and the camp several times already, quite thoroughly, and seen nothing. I suggest we check in with Captain Talos; he'll want to know."

"Let's look a little longer," Gregory said.

"Why?" Gideon demanded. "We still haven't had any breakfast, and Hadar and Dolon have been up all night as it is."

"If we go back without anything, we'll never get breakfast or sleep -- Talos will skin us alive!" Gregory retorted. "And that's nothing compared to what Captain Diana will do -- or didn't you see her watching us when we left?"

Gideon muttered something under his breath, but gave no audible response. Hadar had something more helpful to suggest. "Is it possible she could've taken another path?"

"Well, we've tried several; that's why it's taken us so long already," Gideon replied flatly.

"But what if she got lost? You said yourself we couldn't trust footprints with everybody running

around the city. Maybe she took a left fork instead of a right, in the dark..."

"And she may have tried to stay out of direct light -- those moons are spooky at night," Gregory commented thoughtfully. "And when that yowling started up, it woke everyone; it could've scared her, and she might have blundered into something..."

"Minerva scares easily," Hadar added.

"You should know," Gideon added snidely.

"Someplace unfamiliar... It wouldn't take much..." Gregory continued thinking out loud. "Just around a building, maybe, or..."

"I still think we should check back with the Captain. We can't comb every centimetre of this city ourselves," Gideon insisted.

Hadar and Dolon waited for Gregory's decision. Although he and Gideon were of equal rank, Gregory was much better liked by his fellow Warriors -- Gideon's pompousness kept many people at a distance.

Gregory studied the terrain for a few centons before responding. There were several dusty pathways in sight, evidence of human traffic, weaving past piles of rubble, and meandering among small shrubs and scattered patches of dull, sere greenery.

Not far from where the four searchers stood was the cleft of a deep, rocky chasm, not very broad at their end, but much wider where it bordered the foundation of one of the few intact buildings. Worn by erosion, the fissure continued past them in the direction of the Map Room, effectively dividing the city.

"That gully..." Gregory murmured to himself. All they'd done was mark its location, and walk around it when they had to. But in the dark...?

"A person could stumble into a pit, like Tanis did," he mused, "or fall into a gully in the dark, if the shadows concealed it... Don't get too close to the edge, but let's see if there's any spot where somebody might've tumbled into that."

His flash of intuition was well-founded. The ledge behind the building -- actually, an extension of the wide-based foundation -- fell off sharply, and was less than two metres wide. Protected somewhat from vagrant breezes, several small footprints were distinctly visible; they vanished in swirls of dust and sand a metre or so farther on, and the lip of the fissure was disturbed only a few metres past that spot.

Gideon still looked impatient, but Hadar and Dolon watched intently as Gregory knelt carefully at the edge, peering into the chasm without leaning too far out. He saw a laser lodged in a small niche below him. There'd been a rock slide... The fissure was deeply shadowed, and appeared to curve away from where he knelt. He couldn't see the bottom, couldn't tell if a body lay there, couldn't detect any motion.

"Minerva?" he called, his voice bleak; he didn't really expect any answer. He listened -- there was no sound.

"Find something?" Dolon asked.

Gregory started, not realizing the Ensign was so close to him. "Yeah," he replied. "There's a



Mel. White

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laser down there. Call the medics, and you'd better get the Captain, too."

The tech hurried away, and Gregory began searching for a spot where the descent would be less steep.

\* \* \* \* \*

Freya jerked her hand back with a strangled gasp, and stared in horrified disgust at the small, fuzzy, black-and-silver arachnid. Its tiny eyes seemed to glare up at her before it fled its disturbed web, seeking sanctuary among the roots and dirt the Warrior had exposed. She shuddered.

Spiders! The place was crawling with them! And where there weren't spiders, there were snakes. This was no place for humans, and Freya was beginning to look forward to leaving Byzel, despite her initial enthusiasm.

She wiped her sweaty forehead on her sleeve, deciding that she needed a drink. What a pity they had nothing but water. A stiff shot of something strongly alcoholic might make the dirt, the heat, the snakes, and even the spiders easier to endure.

It would be mid-day soon. Doctor Lupus had ordered afternoon rest periods for everyone but the Security people at the guardposts; the heat and direct sunlight were too dangerous and debilitating for extended periods of physical labour, as several cases of heat exhaustion had quickly taught the Colonials.

Freya headed for water; Elidor stayed behind, sniffing at the disappearing spider, following some trail of his own. The woman was too hot and thirsty to care much, and let the bast go his own way. Elidor was more than capable of taking care of himself.

She gulped down a small ration of water, then sat in the shade of a tower for a few moments, watching the activity around the growing trench. Much of the morning's energy had dissipated as the red blob that was Byzel's sun climbed higher in the sky; now, everyone was listless, and eager only for a break. The men had shed their shirts and tunics; the women regarded them with some degree of envy.

However, the women were suffering from far fewer sunburns than their male compatriots. Freya's tired grin was somewhat malicious as she contemplated the well-muscled back of one of the newer members of the expedition — lobster-red, and getting worse! She didn't like him, anyway.

"You look warm."

Freya looked up at the cheerful speaker, and Alexandra sat down beside her on a well-shaded rock. "Not as warm as Thoth," she responded, gesturing at the Sergeant in question.

"He turns much redder, and he'll be a candidate for Doctor Lupus's tender care," Alexandra observed without much real concern.

"Isn't that where you're supposed to be?"

"Not any more. My foot works again, and I'm supposed to walk it back into shape." She extended her leg, experimentally rotating her ankle. "See? All ready to be tackled again by another clumsy tech."

Freya laughed at the impish tone in her friend's voice. "So you can grab a trowel with the rest of us? Wonderful! Back to the mines, Sergeant!"

Alexandra wrinkled her nose. "Not this morning — I've got a note from my doctor! Besides, Talos has me delivering messages all over the site. I'm taking a break right now, very unofficially." She leaned back on the rock, studying the area. "So this is Srolt, huh? Lovely. Looks like a trench in the middle of nowhere."

"Alex, you're altogether too cheerful for this place."

"I get this way sometimes..."

A small furor distracted them, and the two women were instantly on their feet, hurrying to join the small knot of people collecting at the far end of the trench, east of the tower in whose shade they'd been resting.

Part of Sergeant Menkar's bolsterous reputation derived from his well-known talent for inventive cursing. He was indulging that propensity freely, swearing at Byzel, its bastly inhabitants, and his own superiors. Freya and Alexandra could quickly see why, and tried to smother their laughter. Others were more open in their expressions of amusement or concern.

The Security man was almost literally swimming in sand, dirt, and broken rock, angrily digging himself out of a collapsed section of the trench. Corvus tried to help him, but merely succeeded in causing another small cascade of debris, which nearly buried him and earned him a growl from the man he was trying to rescue. The trench wasn't really very deep, so neither man was in any real danger, but they made an amusing sight on an otherwise boring day.

"My hero," Freya breathed sarcastically, tossing her head in Menkar's direction.

"Let's help get 'em out, anyway," Alexandra laughed.

In the few centons of good-natured brawling it took to haul everyone free of the crumbled area, Sept studied the trench critically, and with growing exasperation. "What happened here, anyway? Weren't you bracing this?"

"Of course, I was," Menkar responded indignantly, his mood nevertheless improving rapidly as a pretty young tech hovered protectively over imagined injuries. "Then a silly bast tore through here — not one of ours, by the way — and slipped out of reach, into a crevice. I grabbed for it, and the whole thing sort of collapsed. I think I saw mortared stone before it caved in on me; there should be a wall or something right near where we're digging."

"Hmmm." Sept's gaze took in the pile of dirt and sand in the shallow trench. "That might be what we're looking for. But why does every discovery on this Lords-forsaken planet have to be found in a cave-in?"

Alexandra laughed, but Freya grimaced. "Don't forget, I was in one of those cave-ins!" she reminded her friend.

"Right, right..." Alexandra forced herself to look serious for all of five microns, then began giggling again.

"Oh, forget it," Freya said in disgust. "Let's get some lunch." She glanced around the site, first quickly, then more carefully. "Where's Eildor?"

\* \* \* \* \*



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Tanis was content -- more than content. A piece of unspectacular stone forgotten in one hand, he stared across the vast amphitheatre, deep in contemplation. A cliff wall shaded him from the direct rays of the early-afternoon sun, and the pillar alongside him shielded him from the view of the rest of his party. Unseen, he gazed past the wide, even rows of perfectly fitted rock to the crescent of the stage -- or what the Colonials called a stage -- itself now occupied by a slowly creeping shadow.

The complex, massive, utterly magnificent simplicity of it... He felt a strong urge, a deep temptation from some hidden recess of the superstitious human psyche; it called upon him to fall to his knees and worship. Nameless deities, alone and forgotten here for countless millennia, still lived in this place, holding sway over the past and overshadowing the present, perhaps to exist for all time...

Could this place have been the temple, the holy place, the sacred site where the native beings of Byzel came to honour their gods? For every race and species he'd ever known had revered some supernatural entity, or feared the power and influence of such beings...

Absently, he shifted his gaze, blinking as he raised his eyes to search the cliff wall. He could see figures in that stone, dimly visible when the shadows were right, barely perceptible to the eye unless viewed obliquely, more easily found by fingers skimming rock. They were shapes too regular to be nature's handiwork -- unless "nature" was the god, and somehow actively intelligent on this planet... Peculiar thought, he mused.

He needed a larger perspective. The figures were too big, part of something larger...

It was too late to do anything about it. Daphne had drawn a handful of incomplete images before sighing and turning to something less difficult. She'd taken holo-pictures, of course, to be studied later; but the captured images always missed many of the more subtle nuances, and these carvings...

Even the huge pillars bore carvings, relief work on the capitals -- high above their human reach, something no man could touch, at least for now. There might be a way onto the top of those vast arches, possibly from the cliffside, but his work force lacked the equipment and personnel for such an endeavour.

Tanis seriously considered bringing a larger party to the site for a period of several days, to truly study the place, and hopefully learn what it could tell them. The amphitheatre was a mystery, one the sentilogist dearly wanted to solve...

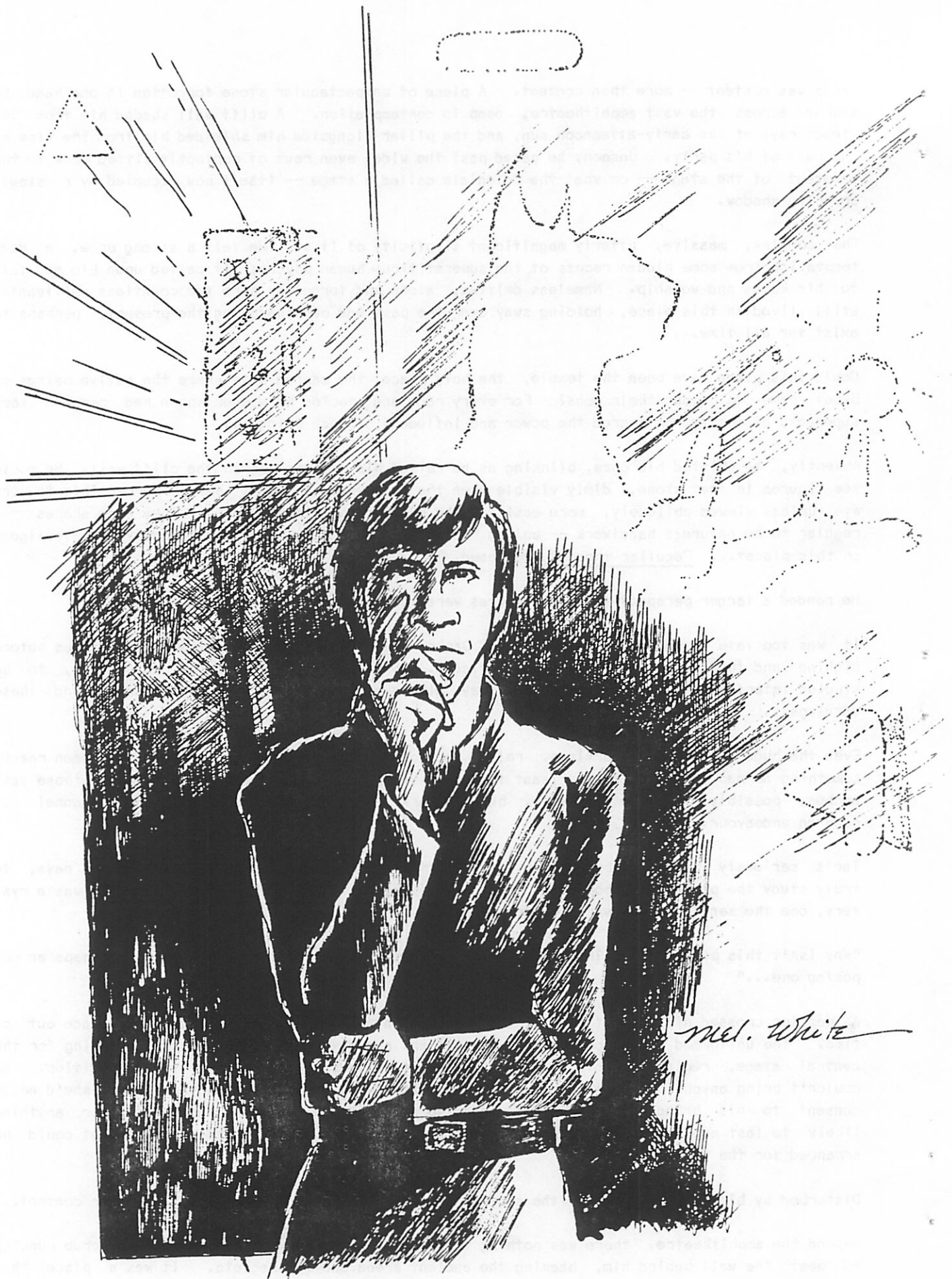
"Why isn't this place marked in the Map Room? Unless it's of a different culture, perhaps an opposing one..."

A Warrior crossed his line of sight, an unwelcome intrusion into the mystique of a place out of time. The uniformed man strode between the pillars and down the ledges of stone, heading for the central stage, reminding Tanis that Diana had quite effectively taken over the expedition. He couldn't bring anyone out here for any length of time; with typical military paranoia, she'd never consent to his bringing any group of people so far from her "defence perimeter" for anything likely to last overnight. He had to accomplish whatever he could today, and see what could be arranged for the future.

Disturbed by his line of thought, the sentilogist turned away from the view, no longer content.

Beyond the amphitheatre, there was nothing to see but the desert, rolling dunes and scrub running to meet the wall behind him, backing the ancient arena and its secrets. It was a place that





apparently had never been worried by flooding...

### Something moved!

The motion was hauntingly familiar; it flickered at the edges of his vision, then was gone. Tanis strained his eyes, peering into the shimmering haze formed by waves of heat rising from the sand. Was he imagining things again, as he'd convinced himself he'd been doing that first day, just before he fell into the pit with all those...

No! Something prickled along his spine, and he shivered. The alarm in his head was more than just a bad memory.

He took an unconscious step from the shelter of the amphitheatre -- or was it a temple? That alarm again!

He whirled, searching with a fearful desperation. Something was watching them! He was sure of it. There was nothing out of the ordinary that he could detect in the vast open-air arena; nothing moved along the arches above the columns; nothing peered down from the cliff wall. So it had to come from out there, from the desert...

Tanis wanted very much to know what it was. He was fairly certain he could deal with it, if only he knew... There were well-armed Warriors within shouting distance, but he had no intention of calling them; he wouldn't give that red-haired witch the satisfaction of admitting he needed the protection she'd sent along despite his protests. He could handle it, alone...

Something else gradually stilled his ingrained sense of caution, eased his instinctive dread...

A few rolling dunes, capped with heat-shimmering haze... His own dusty clothes... He knew no one looking around casually would notice him. If he were missed, someone would demand explanations, but he'd already made it perfectly clear to the military types that he preferred to work alone, undisturbed; his own people knew to respect his intense need for privacy, to allow his mind to follow its instincts and intuitions unhindered; as he studied an alien place -- this alien place -- he unrolled his own understandings...

He shouldn't be missed during the short time he'd be gone...

Quietly, furtively, Tanis slipped away from the amphitheatre. Alone.

In moments, he was in the midst of an empty, dull-coloured world. The sand was loose, blowing in a light breeze that did nothing to cool the air; his feet sank in with every step. The wind was minimally cooling, but hot sand seared through his boots, and the red sun glared down on his floppy-brimmed hat, itself a souvenir of some long-ago expedition.

The hat shaded his eyes, but perspiration ran in rivulets down his forehead and neck beneath it, following well-travelled paths through dirt and sodden hair. He grunted as he wiped away some of the moisture, wondering what in sanity's name he was doing out here where nothing moved; he should retreat back to the shadows of the past...

There was nothing but sand. "Morgan came to this place," he whispered to himself. "Why? What happened to him here?" Did he discover what's been watching us?

The sand seemed to whisper as he walked, passing along the word that an intruder wandered there. He listened to that soft sound, a shimmering sound that was felt rather than heard...



"There's nothing here. I should go back..."

Come...

The sentiologist gasped in surprise, staring about him with wide eyes and open mouth. There was nothing to see. He'd heard nothing. He should go back, before it was too late, before he lost himself in this deadly hot wilderness.

A man could get lost here so easily, listening to the voices...

"I need a drink..." He realized he had no canteen with him. Stupid, to go without one...

Had Morgan taken one? Or did he walk away without food or water, just as he'd walked away without a weapon? And why was the Warrior suddenly so prominent in his thoughts?

Am I hallucinating?

But he knew he wasn't. There was something out there -- not Morgan, but something. And he was no longer sure he wanted to know what it was.

Tanis's steps were slow and tentative, no longer the confident strides that had carried him from the temple -- and he was quite sure it was a temple. He wanted to go back to it.

He turned -- 180 degrees, he thought -- to face the trail he'd made across the sand. But there was no trail. The gentle breeze had obliterated his footprints, leaving no mark in the shifting, whispering sand. Why in Hades hadn't he thought to bring a compass? Even a novice knew better! Now, he wasn't even sure if he was going in the right direction!

After several centons of struggling over rough terrain, he was positive he'd gone the wrong way. The sand sucked at his boots, and the hot wind kept shifting as he moved from open dune to shielded valley, directed by the rippling flow of sand.

"Damn!" He stopped, trying to get his bearings. "I didn't go that far! I should at least be able to see the cliffs from here." But everything looked so different, so unfamiliar, so damned alien!

He was disoriented, that's all, he told himself, hiding from the fearful possibility that he'd been walking longer than he remembered, that he'd gone farther into the desert than he realized. After all, how could he have gone farther, unless he'd been hallucinating, unless he'd somehow lost all track of time.

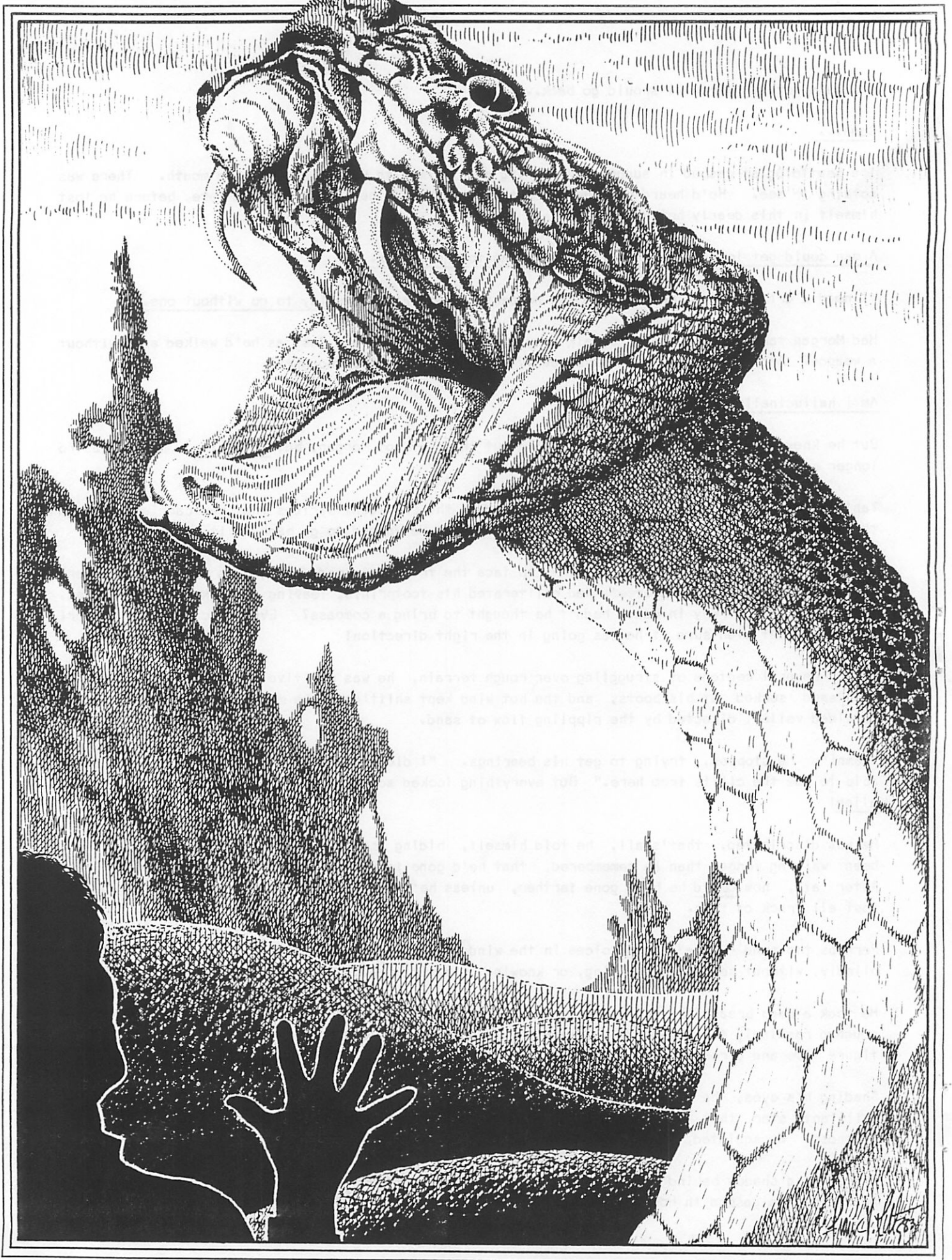
Perhaps the sand -- the luring voices in the wind -- had somehow hypnotized him; and he'd walked blindly, without seeing, or hearing, or knowing -- until something else had disturbed him...

He took a deep breath through suddenly dry lips, and nearly choked; his throat was parched, and he coughed raspingly for a moment. Maybe I've been walking...but what time is it? He could still figure time and direction from the sun.

Shading his eyes, he looked up. His eyes watered, and he flinched at that first glimpse of the brilliant star that seemed to stare solemnly at his small human figure, alone in the arid vastness. He squinted, trying to remember exactly when he'd left the temple...

There was a shadow behind him. When he turned to look at the sudden apparition, his eyes widened again, and he gasped in horror. He tried to turn, to flee his worst nightmare, now suddenly there





In brilliantly coloured reality, but his legs seemed to have become rubber, and his knees buckled. He fell to the sand, still staring, his hands futilely seeking a weapon, or a hiding place, in the sand.

The memory of his whip was completely gone from his mind; both it and his hat lay forgotten on the barren ground. He wanted a rock, or a stick -- whatever ancient man had used against this dread peril, this worst image of evil in all human mythology...

Something unspeakably magnificent reared above the insignificant, scrabbling, worshipping sentiologist. Its scales were nearly as large as a man's hand; they were spread over the great length of the body in strikingly beautiful patterns of colour and shape -- ebony black, a clear and starless night; silver, a flash of bright moonlight; shades of rust, highly polished coppery treasure. Each glowing scale was a jewel, a priceless gem...

The bottomless, alluring void of the eyes fixed on the human, empty of threat or promise or hope, containing no emotion a mere man might understand. The eyes simply stared, holding their captive with a strange and inescapable power. The serpentine body towered over him, stretching beyond the limits of his sight; he would have seen it disappear into the sand, if he could have torn his fascinated gaze from the eyes.

A long forked tongue, red as a flicker of flame, emerged from its mouth, darting back in some small fraction of a micron. Tanis tried to scream, but the sound was only a whimper, the last remnant of courage.

Come...

That strange whisper, the summons no human had the strength to deny... The desert predator, and he was its prey...

The huge wedge-shaped head swayed closer, the tongue suddenly darted into sight again, and Tanis glimpsed sparkling fangs as the alien red thing touched him in a strange and horrifyingly intimate caress, then withdrew, tasting his sweat.

He wanted to scream again, and found he could not. But he could sob, a lost, broken sound in the empty silence.

Morgan, I understand...

The thing leaned closer again.

(To be continued.)

## FROM DEEP SPACE...

Back to the back of the issue this time, with a number of short messages to share with our readers. Your loyalty and dedication to PURPLE AND ORANGE? over the years have been truly amazing, and we hope we will never disappoint you.

A word now about future readers' surveys. We had planned to begin another immediately after printing the results of the first one in Issue #15, but still haven't completed the new questionnaire. Never fear, though — it's coming! And we're hoping for an even greater response this second time.

Most of what remains of this space is going to be devoted to comments about some of the contributors to this issue. First of all, we want our readers to be aware of the surprise addition to our proofreading staff. At Windycon in October of 1983, Melissa Keck came up to our table and, quite unexpectedly, volunteered her services. We cannot find words adequate to express our gratitude. If there's one thing a good publication never has enough of (aside from artists, that is), it's good proofreaders. We try to keep our errors to an absolute minimum; with the help of hard-working people like Melissa — and, of course, Sharon Monroe, David Morgan, and Bill Roper (J.R. Holmes has a special project going, so he didn't proofread this time) — we are able to do so.

Karen River should need no introduction to Midwestern fans, although her incredibly skillful work may not be as well known in other parts of the country. We were delighted (and almost stunned!) when she agreed to do some work for PURPLE AND ORANGE? — and even more surprised to discover she lives in Chicago, not too far from our old home. Welcome, Karen — we are indeed proud to feature your work.

Among our artists, that leaves only Curt Lawhorn, who, unfortunately, neglected to sign his illustration for TIY'S LOG. Curt is an eighth-grade student at the school where Tiy's creator, Judith Gaskins, teaches in Columbus, Indiana. While his work may not be of the same calibre as illustrations done by professionals like Frank Lilitz and near-professionals like Karen River and Joan Hanke-Woods, it does show a tremendous amount of promise. We hope Curt will continue to draw and to study art — and continue to submit to us, as well.

And then there is Judith herself. She wanted to do something different, to show an aspect of life in the GALACTICA universe that, to our knowledge, no one else has ever attempted before. In her own words:

I wrote this story in partial answer to a question I've frequently asked myself. What place do those people who are not mentally or physically agile have in the BG, ST, or SW universe?

By the deliberate use of simple sentences, repetition, and bad grammar, I tried to give the impression of a brain-damaged adult who wants to be and can be a productive crew member of the OSIRIS.

We think Judith has succeeded admirably in her efforts, and we hope to read a lot more about Tiy in issues to come.

Oh, by the way, while we're handing out special praise — the strange brown and/or white hairs



some of you may find in copies of your fanzines belong to our "Lunatic in Residence." Those of you who have already met Bridget know how true her title is. For those of you who have not yet had that (somewhat dubious) privilege, well, you'll just have to take our word for it. But she, too, worked on this issue of PURPLE AND ORANGE? — putting her head in the typist's lap while she typed; kibbitzing constantly as we edited; hovering (and shedding) during the always-exciting collating process. So, thanks to you, too, Your Flakiness...

And all the rest who worked so hard to make PURPLE AND ORANGE? #16 possible: Linda Ruth Pfonner, whose marvellous feline creation once again stalks our pages (and whose name our readers will encounter often in the future)... Karen Klinck, Linda's roommate, and a talent in her own right... Marcia Brin, whose truly professional writing no longer needs any introduction... Joan Hanke-Woods, often nominated for that Hugo that still eludes her, but that she so richly deserves, who took time out from her hectic martial arts schedule, just for us... Frank Liltz, who sent his magnificent illustrations to us early (in November!), because he and Barbara were heading to sunny California... Gennie Summers and Mel White, who both did so much and did it so well... Karen Paul, who helped out after the last minute...

And Sharon Monroe, just because... (And her husband, Larry -- for putting up with both of us!)

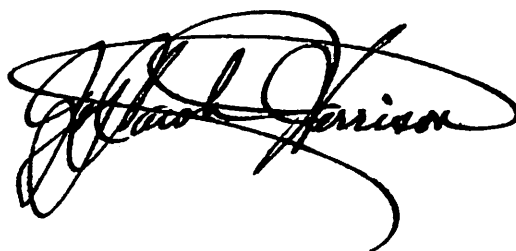
And one more — a special acknowledgement to a very special man, whose name appears in PURPLE AND ORANGE?, yet who does not write, illustrate, type, or proofread. But Frank Prohaska has, for a long time, now, made a lot of what appears on our pages possible. This time? He bought himself a KAYPRO II computer and, the day he picked it up, brought it to us (only on loan, unfortunately!). His computer has no name as yet, but it has proven to be an incredibly hard-working, easy-to-use, and versatile piece of equipment — and it has made all the work on this issue much, much easier (to say nothing of one Hades of a lot faster!). So, thank you, Frank, over and over again; that's yet another one we owe you.

So much for past and present. In the future...

Our next publication will be the long-awaited MURMURS, a novel by a lady known only as Honore Bryte; we have agreed to preserve her anonymity for her own protection. Starbuck, Apollo, Sheba, Iblis, and many others people this fine tale, and we know our readers will enjoy it. To say any more would give too much away...

MURMURS will be published in May of 1984, in time for MediaWest\*Con 4. It will be followed in another three months by PURPLE AND ORANGE? #17, which will contain (among many other things) Part IV of "The Ultimate Victor" (which will conclude in #18) and Part X of the seemingly-endless "Why Did It Have to Be...?" WARRIOR'S LUCK, a short novel by Linda Ruth Pfonner, may be serialized beginning in #17; if not, it will be published in its entirety as a separate novel. We had hoped to include part of it in this issue, but space did not permit. Also in the future are the complete novelization of ALLIES; another PEGASUS novel; BURN, WITCH...; and much more.

Whatever our plans for the future, they would be meaningless without one special ingredient — you, our readers. We've said it many times before, and still can't say it often enough. Whatever pride we — the staff and contributors of PURPLE AND ORANGE? — may feel in the work we've done and the things we've accomplished in the past several years, none of it would have been possible without you. We've done it for you, and will continue to do it for as long as you wish; we are proud and happy to do so. In all humility, we thank you for your loyalty, your dedication, your support, and your affection.



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# PURPLE & ORANGE?

OSIRIS Publications proudly presents PURPLE AND ORANGE? -- a fanzine devoted to *BATTLESTAR GALACTICA*™ and to what the *BATTLESTAR GALACTICA*™ universe should have been -- and would ultimately have become.

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Jones, gunnery sergeant and hedge wizard. Morgan, who hides a dark secret. Diana, bound to the *GALACTICA*™ by ties even stronger than blood. Dion, one-time hero of the Fleet, a man with a past. Freya, who boards the OSIRIS to escape a daggit. Tanis, who likes strange weapons and fears snakes. Laia, Alexandra, Mara, Jason, Hannibal, Garnyd... Meet them all, and many others, on the pages of PURPLE AND ORANGE?

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THE SONIC SCREWDRIVER is a new fanzine from OSIRIS Publications. Devoted to the incredibly successful BBC television series DOCTOR WHO\*, THE SONIC SCREWDRIVER will deal with the popular Time Lord in all his many guises and incarnations, from the elderly and dignified William Hartnell to the comic Patrick Troughton, from the elegant and debonair Jon Pertwee to the madcap Tom Baker, and on to Peter Davison and any who may come after. In the pages of THE SONIC SCREWDRIVER, readers will find the Doctor, all of his companions, and all those beings -- human and otherwise -- whose lives he has touched, for good or ill.

THE SONIC SCREWDRIVER will contain fact and fiction, prose and poetry, serious art and humorous cartoons. We welcome stories, poetry, essays, songs, and art based on episodes of DOCTOR WHO\* seen on television in either the United Kingdom or the United States -- and stories (etc.) based on events from the writers' imaginations, as well.

In conjunction with the first issue of THE SONIC SCREWDRIVER, OSIRIS Publications is holding a contest to design the best logo for this new fanzine. To be considered, entries must be received no later than 30 April 1984 and must follow the guide-lines printed on the reverse of this flyer. The winner will receive a complimentary copy of each of the first two issues of THE SONIC SCREWDRIVER, and will have the satisfaction of seeing that winning logo appear on all successive issues of the fanzine.

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To be considered for publication in the first issue of THE SONIC SCREWDRIVER, submissions must be received no later than 31 May 1984. Send all submissions and any inquiries to:

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# PURPLE & ORANGE?

OSIRIS Publications presents PURPLE AND ORANGE? #14, the first all-OSIRIS issue of our *BATTLESTAR GALACTICA*™ fan-zine.

Due to popular demand, we have reprinted several of our readers' favourite stories about the battlestar™ OSIRIS, sent on a mission of stellar exploration four yahrens before the Destruction of the Colonies. Included with these stories are several new OSIRIS adventures, and Part VII of the on-going tale of the OSIRIS landing party on Byzel, "Why Did It Have to Be...?"

On the pages of PURPLE AND ORANGE? #14, you will meet new members of the OSIRIS crew and will be able to renew acquaintances with old friends. Here, you will find:

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- Clem, who lurks, a demon, in the dark...
- Miss Davenport, with two names, and a passion for ...books...!
- Dion, one-time hero of the Colonial Fleet, a man with a past...
- Freya, she of the abundant hair and caustic tongue -- who boards the OSIRIS to escape a daggit...
- Garnyd, a young man who tells a remarkably unremarkable tale -- but doesn't tell all...
- Jason, Chief Engineer -- and chief brewmaster...
- Jones, gunnery sergeant and hedge wizard...
- Kari Shadowstar, a castaway, lost and far from home, from a galaxy far, far away...
- Morgan, brilliant Viper pilot and astrophysicist, with a dark secret he fears to reveal...
- Tanis, a sentiologist with an archaic weapon and a terrible fear...

And others, too -- Christopher, Diana, Alexandra, Thing, Draco, Flicka, Mara, Alix, Darian, Arion... The crew of the OSIRIS fills the pages of PURPLE AND ORANGE? #14 with drama, adventure, fantasy, and romance. Join them for hours -- *centars!* -- of pleasure and entertainment.

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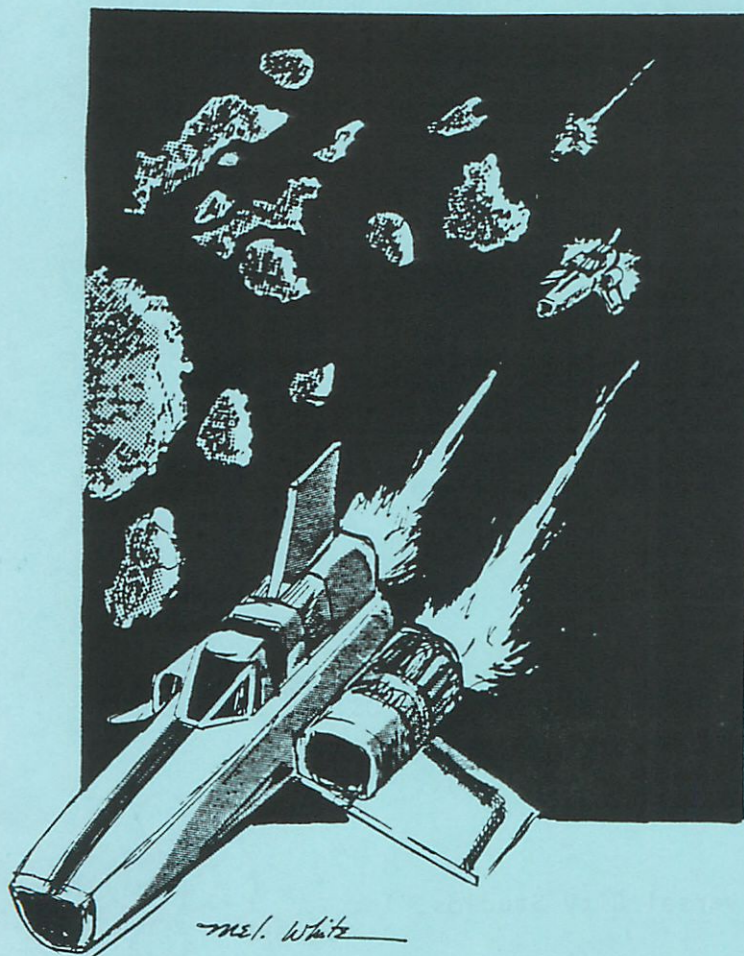
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